FANTASTIC

ULY

STORIES OF IMAGINATION

HE FOREST OF UNREASON

y Robert F. Young

PART II OF II

HE CREATOR

y Clifford Simak

35¢

MAY

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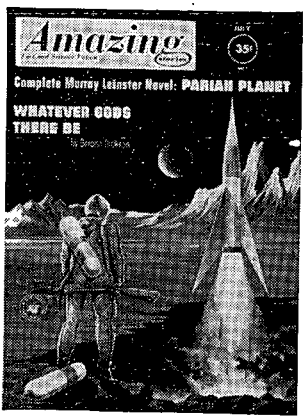

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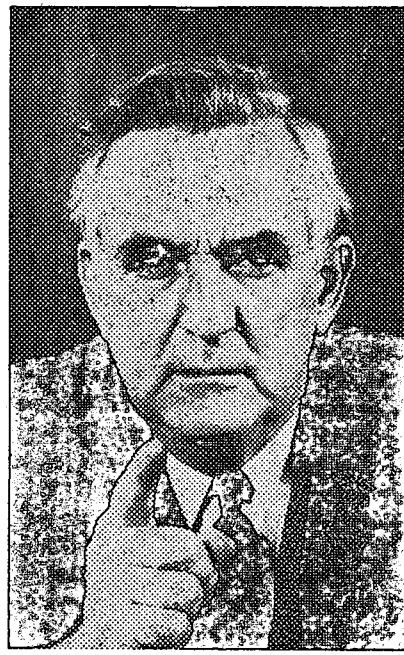

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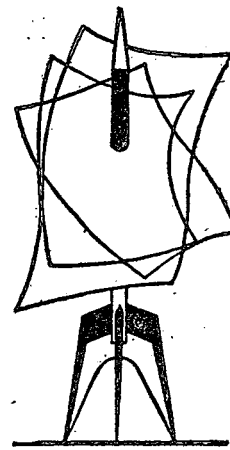

EDITORIAL

A full-fledged argument is raging over something that no one has ever seen or touched—and something that probably never will be seen or touched: anti-matter. Anti-matter, as you know, is a mirror-image of normal matter. Sub-atomic particles of anti-matter have been produced for milli-seconds in atom-smashers. If anti-matter touches matter, both are annihilated—completely converted into pure energy.

But the utter efficiency of this conversion makes anti-matter a likely candidate for a space-vehicle fuel. It has been estimated that a rocket fueled with an amount of anti-matter equal to its own weight might yield an acceleration of half the speed of light. Other scientists have said that it would take 200,000 tons of matter-fuel and 200,000 tons of anti-matter fuel, kept separate until they annihilate each other in the combustion chamber, to move a ten-ton payload through space. But as if the economics of this weren't bleak enough (for economic factors can always be overcome if man wants to), the scientific obstacles seem, at this point, utterly insurmountable. According to Harvard U. physicist Edward Purcell: 1) no one has any idea of how to isolate or store even an ounce of anti-matter; 2) even if the m.-a.m. engine could be built, its exhaust would emit enough radiation to kill all living things on earth instantaneously; 3) the ship itself, traveling at close to the speed of light, would be riddled by collisions with hydrogen atoms in space; and, 4) it would be impossible to protect anyone on the vessel from radiation.

Concludes Purcell: "The moral is that we aren't going anywhere. Maybe you can get there (interstellar space) by magic, but you can't get there by physics."

As editor of our sister science-fiction magazine, AMAZING, we might enter a strong demurrer. But as editor of fen FANTASTIC, we find this rather encouraging. It's been a long time since any expert had a kind word to say for the fantasy of magic!—NL

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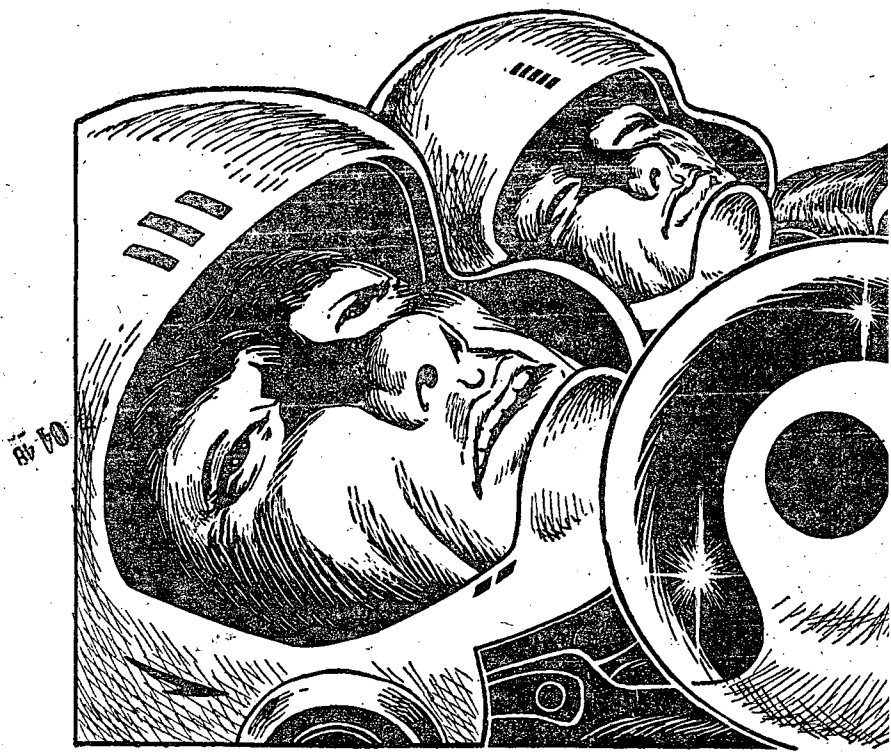
The CREATOR

By CLIFFORD D. SIMAK

Illustrator ADKINS

Introduction by Sam Moskowitz

IT IS hard to believe that a writer of Clifford Simak's standing ever had trouble selling his science fiction, but he did and not because there was anything wrong with the story. Back in the early thirties when The Creator *was written, science fiction was in a state of doldrums and the major device utilized by the*



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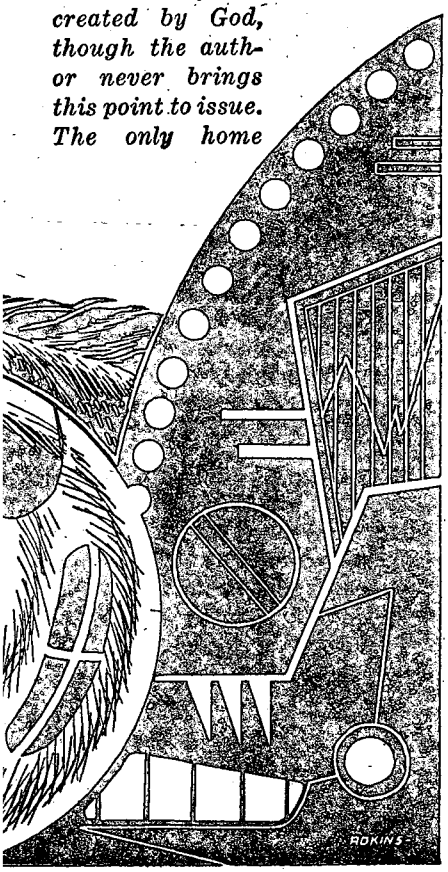
editors to revive reader interest was a call for the "new idea," "thought variant" or "different" story. The Creator *was written with the purpose of originality in mind but it was a little too strong for the editorial stomachs of that period. The editors felt that* The Creator *was inadvertently sacrilegious since it implied that our universe was not created by God, though the author never brings this point to issue. The only home*



Clifford Simak could find for the story was the semi-professional magazine MARVEL TALES, *published as a hobby by the science fiction enthusiast William Crawford.* The Creator *appeared as the feature story of the March-April, 1935 issue of the magazine and its fame was perpetuated by the few hundred readers of the publication, most of whom were active science fiction fans. Eventually the plot of the story was outlined by J. O. Bailey in* Pilgrims Through Space and Time *published in 1947 which encouraged William Crawford to reissue it in a limited printing as a brochure.*

Today, the theme scarcely seems irreligious but the story has lost none of its original verve and vitality. There are echoes of Wells and Stapledon in this early story by one of the great science fiction writers of our time, but there are also evidences of the peculiarly individualistic qualities that would mature to create the modern science fiction classic, City.

FOREWORD

THIS is written in the elder days as the Earth rides close to the rim of eternity, edging nearer to the dying Sun, into which her two inner companions of the solar system have already plunged to a fiery death. The

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Twilight of the Gods is history; and our planet drifts on and on into that oblivion from which nothing escapes, to which time itself may be dedicated in the final cosmic reckoning.

Old Earth, pacing her death march down the corridors of the heavens, turns more slowly upon her axis. Her days have lengthened as she crawls sadly to her tomb, shrouded only in the shreds of her former atmosphere. Because her air has thinned, her sky has lost its cheerful blue depths and she is arched with a dreary grey, which hovers close to the surface, as if the horrors of outer space were pressing close, like ravening wolves, upon the flanks of this ancient monarch of the heavens. When night creeps upon her, stranger stars blaze out like a ring of savage eyes closing in upon a dying campfire.

Earth must mourn her passing, for she has stripped herself of all her gaudy finery and proud trappings. Upon her illimitable deserts and twisted ranges she has set up strange land sculptures. And these must be temples and altars before which she, not forgetting the powers of good and evil throughout the cosmos, prays in her last hours, like a dying man returning to his old faith. Mournful breezes play a hymn of futility across her barren reaches of sand and rocky ledges. The waters of the empty oceans beat out upon the treeless, bleak and age-worn coast a march that is the last brave gesture of an ancient planet which has served its purpose and treads the path to Nirvana.

Little half-men and women, final survivors of a great race, which they remember only through legends handed down from father to son, burrow gnome-like in the bowels of the planet which has mothered their seed from dim days when the thing which was destined to rule over all his fellow creatures crawled in the slime of primal seas. A tired race, they wait for the day legend tells them will come, when the sun blazes anew in the sky and grass grows green upon the barren deserts once again. But I know this day will never come, although I would not disillusion them. I know their legends lie, but why should I destroy the only solid thing they have left to round out their colorless life with the everlasting phenomena of hope?

For this little folks have been kind to me and there is a blood-bond between us that even the passing of a million years cannot erase. They think me a god, a messenger that the day they have awaited so long is near. I regret in time to come they must know me as a false prophet.

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There is no point in writing these words. My little friends ask me what I do and why I do it and do not seem to understand when I explain. They do not comprehend my purpose in making quaint marks and signs upon the well-tanned pelts of the little rodents which over-run their burrows. All they understand is that when I have finished my labor they must take the skins and treasure them as a sacred trust I have left in their hands.

I have no hope the things I record will ever be read. I write my experiences in the same spirit and with the same bewildered purpose which must have characterized the first ancestor who chipped a runic message upon a stone.

I realize that I write the last manuscript. Earth's proud cities have fallen into mounds of dust. The roads that once crossed her surface have disappeared without a trace. No wheels turn, no engines drone. The last tribe of the human race crouches in its caves, watching for the day that will never come.

FIRST EXPERIMENTS

THERE may be some who would claim that Scott Marston and I have blasphemed, that we probed too deeply into mysteries where we had no right.

But be that as it may, I do not regret what we did and I am certain that Scott Marston, wherever he may be, feels as I do, without regrets.

We began our friendship at a little college in California. We were naturally drawn together by the similitude of our life, the affinity of our natures. Although our lines of study were widely separated, he majored in science and I in psychology, we both pursued our education for the pure love of learning rather than with a thought of what education might do toward earning a living.

We eschewed the society of the campus, engaging in none of the frivolities of the student body. We spent happy hours in the library and study hall. Our discussions were ponderous and untouched by thought of the college life which flowed about us in all its colorful pageantry.

In our last two years we roomed together. As we were poor, our quarters were shabby, but this never occurred to us. Our entire life was embraced in our studies. We were fired with the true spirit of research.

Inevitably, we finally narrowed our research down to definite lines. Scott, intrigued by the enigma of time, devoted more and more of his leisure moments to the study of that inscrutable element. He found that very little was known of it, beyond the perplexing equations set up by equally perplexed savants.

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I wandered into as remote paths, the study of psychophysics and hypnology. I followed my research in hypnology until I came to the point where the mass of facts I had accumulated trapped me in a jungle of various diametrically opposed conclusions, many of which verged upon the occult.

It was at the insistence of my friend that I finally sought a solution in the material rather than the psychic world. He argued that if I were to make any real progress I must follow the dictate of pure, cold science rather than the elusive will-o-wisp of an unproven shadow existence.

At length, having completed our required education, we were offered positions as instructors, he in physics and I in psychology. We eagerly accepted, as neither of us had any wish to change the routine of our lives.

Our new status in life changed our mode of living not at all. We continued to dwell in our shabby quarters, we ate at the same restaurant, we had our nightly discussions. The fact that we were no longer students in the generally accepted term of the word made no iota of difference to our research and study.

It was in the second year after we had been appointed instructors that I finally stumbled upon my "consciousness unit" theory. Gradually I worked it out with the enthusiastic moral support of my friend who rendered me what assistance he could.

The theory was beautiful in simplicity. It was based upon the hypothesis that a dream is an expression of one's consciousness, that it is one's second self going forth to adventure and travel. When the physical being is at rest the consciousness is released and can travel and adventure at will within certain limits.

I went one step further, however. I assumed that the consciousness actually does travel, that certain infinitesimal parts of one's brain do actually escape to visit the strange places and encounter the odd events of which one dreams.

This was taking dreams out of the psychic world to which they had formerly been regulated and placing them on a solid scientific basis.

I speak of my theory as a "consciousness unit" theory. Scott and I spoke of the units as "consciousness cells," although we were aware they could not possibly be cells. I thought of them as highly specialized electrons, despite the fact that it appeared ridiculous to suspect electrons of specialization. Scott contended that a wave force, an intelligence wave, might be

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nearer the truth. Which of us was correct was never determined, nor did it make any difference.

As may be suspected, I never definitely arrived at undeniable proof to sustain my theory, although later developments would seem to bear it out.

STRANGELY, it was Scott Marston who did the most to add whatever measure of weight I could ever attach to my hypothesis.

While I was devoting my time to the abstract study of dreams, Scott was continuing with his equally baffling study of time. He confided to me that he was well satisfied with the progress he was making. At times he explained to me what he was doing, but my natural inaptitude at figures made impossible an understanding of the formidable array of formulas which he spread out before me.

I accepted as a matter of course his statement that he had finally discovered a time force, which he claimed was identical with a fourth dimensional force. At first the force existed only in a jumble of equations, formulas and graphs on a litter of paper, but finally we pooled our total resources and under Scott's hand a machine took shape.

Finished, it crouched like a malign entity on the work table, but it pulsed and hummed with a strange power that was of no earthly source.

"It is operating on time, pure time," declared Scott. "It is warping and distorting the time pattern, snatching power from the fourth dimension. Given a machine large enough, we could create a time-stress great enough to throw this world into a new plane created by the distortion of the time-field."

We shuddered as we gazed upon the humming mass of metal and realized the possibilities of our discovery. Perhaps for a moment we feared that we had probed too deeply into the mystery of an element that should have remained forever outside the providence of human knowledge.

The realization that he had only scratched the surface, however, drove Scott on to renewed efforts. He even begrudged the time taken by his work as instructor and there were weeks when we ate meager lunches in our rooms after spending all our available funds but a few pennies to buy some piece needed for the time-power machine.

Came the day when we placed a potted plant within a compartment in the machine. We turned on the mechanism and when we opened the door after a few minutes the plant was gone. The pot and earth within it was intact,

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but the plant had vanished. Search of the pot revealed that not even a bit of root remained.

Where had the plant gone? Why did the pot and earth remain?

Scott declared the plant had been shunted into an outre dimension, lying between the lines of stress created in the time pattern by the action of the machine. He concluded that the newly discovered force acted more swiftly upon a live organism than upon an inanimate object.

We replaced the pot within the compartment, but after twenty-four hours it was still there. We were forced to conclude the force had no effect upon inanimate objects.

We found later that here we touched close to the truth, but had failed to grasp it in its entirety.

THE DREAM

A YEAR following the construction of the time-power machine, Scott came into an inheritance when a relative, whom he had almost forgotten but who apparently had not forgotten him, died. The inheritance was modest, but to Scott and I, who had lived from hand to mouth for years, it appeared large.

Scott resigned his position as instructor and insisted upon my doing the same in order that we might devote our uninterrupted time to reasearch.

Scott immediately set about the construction of a larger machine, while I plunged with enthusiasm into certain experiments I had held in mind for some time.

It was not until then that we thought to link our endeavors. Our research had always seemed separated by too great a chasm to allow collaboration beyond the limited mutual aid of which we were both capable and which steadily diminished as our work progressed further and further, assuming greater and greater complications, demanding more and more specialization.

The idea occurred to me following repetition of a particularly vivid dream. In the dream I stood in a colossal laboratory, an unearthly laboratory, which seemed to stretch away on every hand for inconceivable distances. It was equipped with strange and unfamiliar apparatus and uncanny machines. On the first night the laboratory seemed unreal and filled with an unnatural mist, but on each subsequent occasion it became more and more real, until upon awakening I could reconstruct many of its details with surprising clarity. I even made a sketch of some of the apparatus for Scott and he agreed that I must have drawn it from the memory of my dream.

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No man could have imagined unaided the sketches I spread upon paper for my friend.

Scott expressed an opinion that my research into hypnology had served to train my "consciousness units" to a point where they had become more specialized and were capable of retaining a more accurate memory of their wandering. I formulated a theory that my "consciousness units" had actually increased in number, which would account in a measure for the vividness of the dream.

"I wonder," I mused, "if your time-power would have any influence upon the units."

Scott hummed under his breath. "I wonder," he said.

The dream occurred at regular intervals. Had it not been for my absorption in my work, the dream might have become irksome, but I was elated, for I had found in myself a subject for investigation.

One night Scott brought forth a mechanism resembling the head phones of early radio sets, on which he had been working for weeks. He had not yet explained its purpose.

"Pete," he said, "I want you to move your cot near the table and put on this helmet. When you go to sleep I'll plug it in the time-power. If it has any effect upon consciousness units, this will demonstrate it."

He noticed my hesitation.

"Don't be afraid," he urged. "I will watch beside you. If anything goes wrong, I'll jerk the plug and waken you."

So I put on the helmet and with Scott Marston sitting in a chair beside my cot, went to sleep.

THAT night I seemed to actually walk in the laboratory. I saw no one, but I examined the place from end to end. I distinctly remember handling strange tools, the use of which I could only vaguely speculate upon. Flanking the main laboratory were many archways, opening into smaller rooms, which I did not investigate. The architecture of the laboratory and the archways was unbelievably alien, a fact I had noticed before but had never examined in such minute detail.

I opened my eyes and saw the anxious face of Scott Marston above me.

"What happened, Pete?" he asked.

I grasped his arm.

"Scott, I was there. I actually walked in the laboratory. I picked up tools. I can see the place now, plainer than ever before."

I saw a wild light come into his eyes. He rose from the chair and stood towering above me as I propped myself up on my arms.

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"Do you know what we've found, Pete! Do you realize that we can travel in time, that we can explore the future, investigate the past? We are not even bound to this sphere, this plane of existence. We can travel into the multi-dimensions. We can go back to the first flush of eternity and see the cosmos born out of the womb of nothingness! We can travel forward to the day when all that exists comes to an end in the ultimate dispersion of wasted energy, when even space may be wiped out of existence and nothing but frozen time remains!"

"Are you mad, Scott?"

His eyes gleamed.

"Not mad, Pete. Victorious! We can build a machine large enough, powerful enough, to turn every cell of our bodies into consciousness units. We can travel in body as well as in thought. We can live thousands of lifetimes, review billions of years. We can visit undreamed of planets, unknown ages. We hold time in our hands!"

He beat his clenched fists together.

"That plant we placed in the machine. My God, Pete, do you know what happened to it? What primordial memories did that plant hold? Where is it now? Is it in some swamp of the Carboniferous age? Has it returned to its ancestral era?"

YEARS passed, but we scarcely noticed their passing.

Our hair greyed slightly at the temples and the mantle of youth dropped slowly from us. No fame came to us, for our research had progressed to a point where it would have strained even the most credulous mind to believe what we could have unfolded.

Scott built his larger time-power machine, experimented with it, devised new improvements, discovered new details . . . and rebuilt it, not once, but many times. The ultimate machine, squatting like an alien god in our work shop, bore little resemblance to the original model.

On my part, I delved more deeply into my study of dreams, relentlessly pursuing my theory of consciousness units. My progress necessarily was slower than that of my friend as I was dealing almost entirely with the abtruse although I tried to make it as practical as possible, while Scott had a more practical and material basis for his investigations.

Of course, we soon decided to make the attempt to actually transfer our bodies into the laboratory of my dreams. That is, we proposed to transform all the electrons, all the elements of our bodies, into consciousness units through the use of the time-

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power. A more daring scheme possibly had never been conceived by man.

In an attempt to impress upon my friend's mind a picture of the laboratory, I drew diagrams and pictures, visiting the laboratory many times, with the aid of the time-power, to gather more detailed data on the place.

It was not until I used hypnotism that I could finally transfer to Scott's mind a true picture of that massive room with its outre scientific equipment.

It was a day of high triumph when Scott, placed under the influence of the time-power, awoke to tell me of the place I had visited so often. It was not until then that we could be absolutely sure we had accomplished the first, and perhaps most difficult, step in our great experiment.

I plunged into a mad study of the psychology of the Oriental asetic, who of all people was the furthest advanced in the matter of concentration, the science of will power, and the ability to subjugate the body to the mind.

Although my studies left much to be desired, they nevertheless pointed the way for us to consciously aid the time-power element in reducing our corporeal beings to the state of consciousness units necessary for our actual transportation to the huge laboratory with which we had both grown so familiar.

There were other places than the dream-laboratory, of course. Both of us, in our half-life imparted by the time-power, visited other strange places, the location of which in time and space we could not determine. We looked upon sights which would have blasted our mortal sanity had we gazed upon them in full consciousness. There were times when we awoke with blanched faces and told each other in ghastly, fear-ridden whispers of the horrors that dwelled in some unprobed dimension of the unplumbed depth of the cosmos. We stared at shambling, slithering things which we recognized as the descendants of entities, or perhaps the very entities, which were related in manuscripts written by ancient men versed in the blackest of sorcery—and still remembered in the hag-ridden tales of people in the hinterlands.

But it was upon the mysterious laboratory that we centered all our efforts. It had been our first real glimpse into the vast vista to which we had raised the veil and to it we remained true, regarding those other places as mere side excursions into the recondite world we had discovered.

IN THE CREATOR'S LABORATORY

AT LAST the day arrived when we were satisfied we had advanced sufficiently far in

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our investigations and had perfected our technique to a point where we might safely attempt an actual excursion into the familiar, yet unknown, realm of the dream-laboratory.

The completed and improved time-power machine squatted before us like a hideous relic out of the forgotten days of an earlier age, its weird voice filling the entire house, rising and falling, half the time a scream, half the time a deep murmur. Its polished sides glistened evilly and the mirrors set about it at inconceivable angles in their relation to each other, caught the glare from the row of stepup tubes across the top, reflecting the light to bathe the entire creation in an unholy glow.

We stood before it, our hair tinged with grey, our faces marked by lines of premature age. We were young men grown old in the service of our ambition and vast curiosity.

After ten years we had created a thing that I now realize might have killed us both. But at that time we were superbly confident. Ten years of moulding metal and glass, harnessing and taming strange powers! Ten years of moulding brains, of concentrating and stepping up the sensitivity and strength of our consciousness until day and night, there lurked in the back of our brains an image of that mysterious laboratory. As our consciousness direction had been gradually narrowed, the laboratory had become almost a second life to us.

Scott pressed a stud on the side of the machine and a door swung outward, revealing an interior compartment which yawned like a black maw. In that maw was no hint of the raw power and surging strength revealed by the exterior. Yet, to the uninitate, it would have held a horrible threat of its own.

Scott stepped through the door into the pitch black interior; gently he lowered himself into the reclining seat, reaching out to place his hands on the power controls.

I slid in beside him and closed the door. As the last ray of light was shut out, absolute blackness enveloped us. We fitted power helmets on our heads. Terrific energy poured through us, beating through our bodies, seeming to tear us to pieces.

My friend stretched forth a groping hand. Fumbling in the darkness, I found it. Our hands closed in a fierce grip, the handshake of men about to venture into the unknown.

I fought for control of my thoughts, centered them, savagely upon the laboratory, recalling, with a super-effort every detail of its interior. Then

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Scott must have shoved the power control full over. My body was pain-wracked, then seemed to sway with giddiness. I forgot my body. The laboratory seemed nearer, it seemed to flash up at me. I was falling toward it, falling rapidly. I was a detached thought speeding along a directional line, falling straight into the laboratory . . . and I was very ill.

My fall was suddenly broken, without jar or impact.

I was standing in the laboratory. I could feel the cold of the floor beneath my feet.

I glanced sidewise and there stood Scott Marston and my friend was stark naked. Of course, we would be naked. Our clothing would not be transported through the time-power machine.

"It didn't kill us," remarked Scott.

"Not even a scratch," I asserted.

We faced each other and shook hands, solemnly, for again we had triumphed and that handshake was a self-imposed congratulation.

WE TURNED back to the room before us. It was a colorful place. Vari-colored liquids reposed in gleaming containers. The furniture, queerly carved and constructed along lines alien to any earthly standard, seemed to be of highly polished, iridescent wood. Through the windows poured a brilliant blue daylight. Great globes suspended from the ceiling further illuminated the building with a soft white glow.

A cone of light, a creamy white faintly tinged with pink, floated through an arched doorway and entered the room. We stared at it. It seemed to be light, yet was it light? It was not transparent and although it gave one the impression of intense brilliance, its color was so soft that it did not hurt one's eyes to look at it.

The cone, about ten feet in height, rested on its smaller end and advanced rapidly toward us. Its approach was silent. There was not even the remotest suggestion of sound in the entire room. It came to a rest a short distance in front of us and I had an uncanny sense that the thing was busily observing us.

"Who are you?"

The voice seemed to fill the room, yet there was no one there but Scott and I, and neither of us had spoken. We looked at one another in astonishment and then shifted our gaze to the cone of light, motionless, resting quietly before us.

"I am speaking," said the Voice and instantly each of us knew that the strange cone before us had voiced the words.

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"I am not speaking," went on the Voice. "That was a misstatement. I am thinking. You hear my thoughts. I can as easily hear yours."

"Telepathy," I suggested.

"Your term is a strange one," replied the Voice, "but the mental image the term calls up tells me that you faintly understand the principle.

"I perceive from your thoughts that you are from a place which you call the Earth. I know where the Earth is located. I understand you are puzzled and discomforted by my appearance, my powers, and my general disresemblance to anything you have ever encountered. Do not be alarmed. I welcome you here. I understand you worked hard and well to arrive here and no harm will befall you."

"I am Scott Marston," said my friend, "and this man is Peter Sands."

The thoughts of the light-cone reached out to envelope us and there was a faint tinge of rebuke, a timbre of pity at what must have appeared to the thing as unwarranted egotism on our part.

"In this place there are no names. We are known by our personalities. However, as your mentality demands an identifying name, you may think of me as the Creator.

"And now, there are others I would have you see."

He sounded a call, a weird call which seemed to incorporate as equally a weird name.

There was a patter of feet on the floor and from an adjoining room ran three animal-like figures. Two were similar. They were pudgy of body, with thick, short legs which terminated in rounded pads that made sucking sounds as they ran. They had no arms, but from the center of their bulging chests sprang a tentacle, fashioned somewhat after the manner of an elephant's trunk, but with a number of small tentacles at its end. Their heads, rising to a peak from which grew a plumé of gayly-colored feathers, sat upon their tapering shoulders without benefit of necks.

The third was an antithesis of the first two. He was tall and spindly, built on the lines of a walking stick insect. His gangling legs were three-jointed. His grotesquely long arms dangled almost to the floor. Looking at his body, I believed I could have encircled it with my two hands. His head was simply an oval ball set on top of the stick-like body. The creature more nearly resembled a man than the other two, but he was a caricature of a man, a comic offering from the pen of a sardonic cartoonist.

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The Creator seemed to be addressing the three.

"Here," he said, "are some new arrivals. They came here, I gather, in much the same manner you did. They are great scientists, great as yourselves. You will be friends."

The Creator turned his attention to us.

"These beings which you see came here as you did and are my guests as you are my guests. They may appear outlandish to you. Rest assured that you appear just as queer to them. They are brothers of yours, neighbors of yours. They are from your ——————————."

I received the impression of gazing down on vast space, filled with swirling motes of light.

"He means our solar system," suggested Scott.

Carefully I built up in my mind a diagram of the solar system.

"No!" the denial crashed like an angry thunderbolt upon us. Again the image of unimaginable space and of thousands of points of light—of swirling nebulae, of solar systems, mighty double suns and island universes.

"He means the universe," said Scott.

"Certainly they came from our universe," I replied. "The universe is everything, isn't it —all existing things?"

Again the negative of the Creator burned its way into our brains.

"You are mistaken, Earthman. Your knowledge here counts as nothing. You are mere infants. But come; I will show you what your universe consists of."

— OUR UNIVERSE?

STREAMERS of light writhed down from the cone toward us. As we shrank back they coiled about our waists and gently lifted us. Soothing thoughts flowed over us, instructions to commit ourselves unreservedly to the care of the Creator, to fear no harm. Under this reassurance, my fears quieted. I felt that I was under the protection of a benevolent being, that his great power and compassion would shield me in this strange world. A Creator, in very truth!

The Creator glided across the floor to set us on our feet on the top of a huge table, which stood about seven feet above the floor level.

On the table top, directly before me, I saw a thin oval receptacle, made of a substance resembling glass. It was about a foot across its greatest length and perhaps little more than half as wide and about four inches deep. The receptacle was filled with a sort of grayish substance, a mass of putty-like material. To

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me it suggested nothing more than a mass of brain substance.

"There," said the Creator, pointing a light-streamer finger at the disgusting mass, "is your universe."

"What!" cried Scott.

"It is so," ponderously declared the Creator.

"Such a thing is impossible," firmly asserted Scott. "The universe is boundless. At one time it was believed that it was finite, that it was enclosed by the curvature of space. I am convinced, however, through my study of time, that the universe, composed of millions of overlapping and interlocking dimensions, can be nothing but eternal and infinite. I do not mean that there will not be a time when all matter will be destroyed, but I do maintain——"

"You are disrespectful and conceited," boomed the thought vibrations of the Creator. "That is your universe. I made it. I created it. And more. I created the life that teems within it. I was curious to learn what form that life would take, so I sent powerful thought vibrations into it, calling that life out. I had little hope that it had developed the necessary intelligence to find the road to my laboratory, but I find that at least five of the beings evolving from my created life possessed brains tuned finely enough to catch my vibrations and possessed sufficient intelligence to break out of their medium. You are two of these five. The other three you have just seen."

"You mean," said Scott, speaking softly, "that you created matter and then went further and created life?"

"I did."

I stared at the putty-like mass. The universe! Millions of galaxies composed of millions of suns and planets—all in that lump of matter!

"This is the greatest hoax I've ever seen," declared Scott, a deliberate note of scorn in his voice. "If that is the universe down there, how are we so big? I could step on that dish and break the universe all to smithereens. It doesn't fit."

THE light-finger of the Creator flicked out and seized my friend, wafting him high above the table. The Creator glowed with dull flashes of red and purple.

His thought vibrations filled the room to bursting with their power.

"Presumptuous one! You defy the Creator. You call his great work a lie! You, with your little knowledge! You, a specimen of the artificial life I created, would tell me, your very Creator, that I am wrong!"

I stood frozen, staring at my

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friend, suspended above me at the end of the rigid light-streamer. I could see Scott's face. It was set and white, but there was no sign of fear upon it.

His voice came down to me, cold and mocking.

"A jealous god," he taunted.

The Creator set him down gently beside me. His thoughts came to us evenly, with no trace of his terrible anger of only a moment before.

"I am not jealous. I am above all your imperfect emotions. I have evolved to the highest type of life but one—pure thought. In time I will achieve that. I may grow impatient at times with your tiny brains, with your imperfect knowledge, with your egotism, but beyond that I am unemotional. The emotions have become unnecessary to my existence."

I hurried to intervene.

"My friend spoke without thinking," I explained. "You realize this is all unusual to us. Something beyond any previous experience. It is hard for us to believe."

"I know it must be hard for you to understand," agreed the Creator, "You are in an ultra-universe. The electrons and protons making up your body have grown to billions and billions of times their former size, with correspondingly greater distances between them. It is all a matter of relativity. I did not consciously create your universe, I merely created electrons and protons. I created matter. I created life and injected it into the matter.

"I learned from the three who preceded you here that all things upon my electrons and protons, even my very created electrons and protons, are themselves composed of electrons and protons. This I had not suspected. I am at a loss to explain it. I am beginning to believe that one will never find an end to the mysteries of matter and life. It may be that the electrons and protons you know are composed of billions of infinitely smaller electrons and protons."

"And I suppose," mocked Scott, "that you, the Creator, may be merely a bit of synthetic life living in a universe that is in turn merely a mass of matter in some greater laboratory."

"It may be so," said the Creator. "My knowledge has made me very humble."

Scott laughed.

"And now," said the Creator, "if you will tell me what food and other necessities you require to sustain life, I will see you are provided for. You also will wish to build the machine which will take you back to Earth once more. You shall be assigned living quarters and may do as you wish. When your machine is

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completed, you may return to Earth. If you do not wish to do so, you are welcome to remain indefinitely as my guests. All I wished you to come here for was to satisfy my curiosity concerning what forms my artificial life may have taken."

The tentacles of light lifted us carefully to the floor and we followed the Creator to our room, which adjoined the laboratory proper and was connected to it by a high, wide archway. What the place lacked in privacy, it made up in beauty. Finished in pastel shades, it was easy on the eyes and soothing to one's nerves.

We formed mind pictures of beds, tables and chairs. We described our foods and their chemical composition. Water we did not need to describe. The Creator knew instantly what it was. It, of all the necessities of our life, however, seemed the only thing in common with our earth contained in this ultra-universe into which we had projected ourselves.

IN WHAT seemed to us a miraculously short time our needs were provided. We were supplied with furniture, food and clothing, all of which apparently was produced synthetically by the Creator in his laboratory.

Later we were to learn that the combining of elements and the shaping of the finished product was a routine matter. A huge, yet simple machine was used in the combination and fixing of the elements.

Steel, glass, and tools, shaped according to specifications given the Creator by Scott, were delivered to us in a large workroom directly off the laboratory where our three compatriots of the universe were at work upon their machines.

The machine being constructed by the lone gangling creature which Scott and I had immediately dubbed the "walking-stick-man", resembled in structure the creature building it. It was shaped like a pyramid and into its assembly had gone hundreds of long rods.

The machine of the elephant-men was a prosaic affair, shaped like a crude box of some rubber-material, but its inner machinery, which we found to be entirely alien to any earthly conceptions, was intricate.

From the first the walking-stick-man disregarded us except when we forced our attentions upon him.

The elephant-men were friendly, however.

We had hardly been introduced into the workshop before the two of them attempted to strike up an acquaintance with us.

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We spoke to them as they stood before us, but they merely blinked their dull expressionless eyes. They touched us with their trunks, and we felt faint electric shocks which varied in intensity, like the impulses travelling along a wire, like some secret code tapped out by a telegrapher.

"They have no auditory sense," said Scott. "They talk by the transmission of electrical impulses through their trunks. There's no use talking to them."

"And in a thousand years we might figure out their electrical language," I replied.

After a few more futile attempts to establish communication Scott turned to the task of constructing the time-power machine, while the elephant-men padded back to their own work.

I walked over to the walking-stick-man and attempted to establish communication with him, but with no better results. The creature seeming to resent my interruption of his work, waved his hands in fantastic gestures, working his mouth rapidly. In despair, I realized that he was talking to me, but that his jabbering was pitched too high for my ear to catch.

Here were representatives of three different races, all three of a high degree of intelligence else they never would have reached this super-plane, and not a single thought, not one idea could they interchange. Even had a communication of ideas been possible, I wondered if we could have found any common ground of understanding.

I STARED at the machines. They were utterly different from each other and neither bore any resemblance to ours. Undoubtedly they all operated on dissimilar principles.

In that one room adjoining the main laboratory were being constructed three essentially different types of mechanisms by three entirely different types of beings. Yet each machine was designed to accomplish the same result and each of the beings were striving for the same goal!

Unable to assist Scott in his building of the time-power machine, I spent the greater part of my waking hours in roaming about the laboratory, in watching the Creator at work. Occasionally I talked to him. At times he explained to me what he was doing, but I am afraid I understood little of what he told me.

One day he allowed me to look through a microscope at a part of the matter he had told us contained our universe.

I was unprepared for what I saw. As I peered into the complicated machine, I saw protons, electrons! Judged by earthly

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standards, they were grouped peculiarly, but their formation corresponded almost exactly to our planetary system. I sensed that certain properties in that master-microscope created an optical illusion by grouping them more closely than were their actual corresponding distances. The distance between them had been foreshortened to allow an entire group to be within a field of vision.

But this was impossible! The very lenses through which I was looking were themselves formed of electrons and protons! How could they have any magnifying power?

The Creator read my thoughts and tried to explain, but his explanation was merely a blur of distances, a mass of outlandish mathematical equations and a pyramiding of stupendous formulas dealing with the properties of light. I realized that, with the Creator, the Einstein equations were elementary, that the most intricate mathematics conceived by man were rudimentary to him as simple addition.

He must have realized it, too, for after that he did not attempt to explain anything to me. He made it plain, however, that I was welcome to visit him at his work and as time passed, he came to take my presence as a matter of course. At times he seemed to forget I was about.

The work on the time-power machine was progressing steadily under Scott's skillful hands. I could see that the other two machines were nearing completion, but that my friend was working with greater speed. I calculated that all three of the machines would be completed at practically the same time.

"I don't like this place," Scott confided to me. "I want to get the machine built and get out of here as soon as I can. The Creator is a being entirely different from us. His thought processes and emotional reflexes can bear little resemblance to ours. He is further advanced along the scale of life than we. I am not fool enough to believe he accepts us as his equals. He claims he created us. Whether he did or not, and I can't bring myself to believe that he did, he nevertheless believes he did. That makes us his property,—in his own belief, at least—to do with as he wishes. I'm getting out of here before something happens."

One of the elephant-men, who had been working with his partner, approached us as we talked. He tapped me gently with his trunk and then stood stupidly staring at us.

"Funny," said Scott, "That fellow has been bothering me all day. He's got something he wants to tell us, but he doesn't seem to be able to get it across."

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Patiently I attempted an elementary language, but the elephant-man merely stared, unmoved, apparently not understanding.

The following day I secured from the Creator a supply of synthetic paper and a sort of black crayon. With these I approached the elephant-men and drew simple pictures, but again I failed. The strange creatures merely stared. Pictures and diagrams meant nothing to them.

The walking-stick-man, however, watched us from across the room and after the elephant-men had turned away to their work, he walked over to where I stood and held out his hands for the tablet and crayon. I gave them to him. He studied my sketches for a moment, ripped off the sheet and rapidly wielded the crayon. He handed back the tablet. On the sheet were a number of hieroglyphics. I could make no head or tail of them. For a long time the two of us labored over the tablet. We covered the floor with sheets covered with our scribbling, pictures and diagrams. We quit in despair after advancing no further than recognizing the symbols for the cardinal numbers.

It was apparent that not only the elephant-men but the walking-stick-man as well wished to communicate something to us. Scott and I discussed it often, racking our brains for some means to establish communication with our brothers in exile.

CREATION — AND DESTRUCTION

IT WAS shortly after this I made the discovery that I was able to read the unprojected thoughts of the Creator. I imagine that this was made possible by the fact that our host paid little attention to me as he went about his work. Busy with his tasks, his thoughts must have seeped out as he mulled over the problems confronting him. It must have been through this thought seepage that I caught the first of his unprojected brain-images.

At first I received just faint impressions, sort of half thoughts. Realizing what was occurring, I concentrated upon his thoughts, endeavoring to bore into his brain, to probe out those other thoughts which lay beneath the surface. If it had not been for the intensive mind training which I had imposed upon myself prior to the attempt to project my body through the time-power machine, I am certain I would have failed. Without this training, I doubt if I would have been able to read his thoughts unbidden in the first place—certainly I could not have prevented him from learning that I had.

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Recalling Scott's suspicions, I realised that my suddenly discovered ability might be used to our advantage. I also realized that this ability would be worthless should the Creator learn of it. In such case, he would be alert and would close his thought processes to me. My hope lay in keeping any suspicion disarmed. Therefore I must not only read his mind but must also keep a portion of mine closed to him.

Patch by patch I pieced his thoughts together like a jigsaw puzzle.

He was studying the destruction of matter, seeking a method of completely annihilating it. Having discovered a means of creating matter, he was now experimenting with its destruction.

I did not share my secret with Scott, for I feared that he would unconsciously betray it to the Creator.

As days passed, I learned that the Creator was considering the destruction of matter without the use of heat. I knew that, even on Earth, it was generally conceded a temperature of 4,000,000,000,000 degrees Fahrenheit would absolutely annihilate matter. I had believed the Creator had found some manner in which he could control such an excessive temperature. But to attempt to destroy matter without using heat at all——! I believe that it was not until then that I fully realized the great chasm of intelligence that lay between myself and this creature of light.

I have no idea how long we remained in the world of the Creator before Scott announced that the machine in which we expected to return to our universe was ready for a few tests. Time had the illusive quality in this queer place of slithering along without noticeably passing. Although I did not think of it at the time, I cannot recollect now that the Creator employed any means of measuring time. Perhaps time, so far as he was concerned, had become an unnecessary equation. Perhaps he was eternal and time held no significance for him in his eternity.

The elephant-men and the walking-stick-man had already completed their machines, but they seemed to be waiting for us. Was it a gesture of respect? We did not know at the time.

While Scott made the final tests of our machine I walked into the laboratory. The Creator was at work at his accustomed place. Since our arrival he had paid little attention to us. Now that we were about to leave he made no expression of regret, no sign of farewell.

I approached him, wondering if I should bid him farewell. I had grown to respect him. I wanted to say good-bye, and yet. . . .

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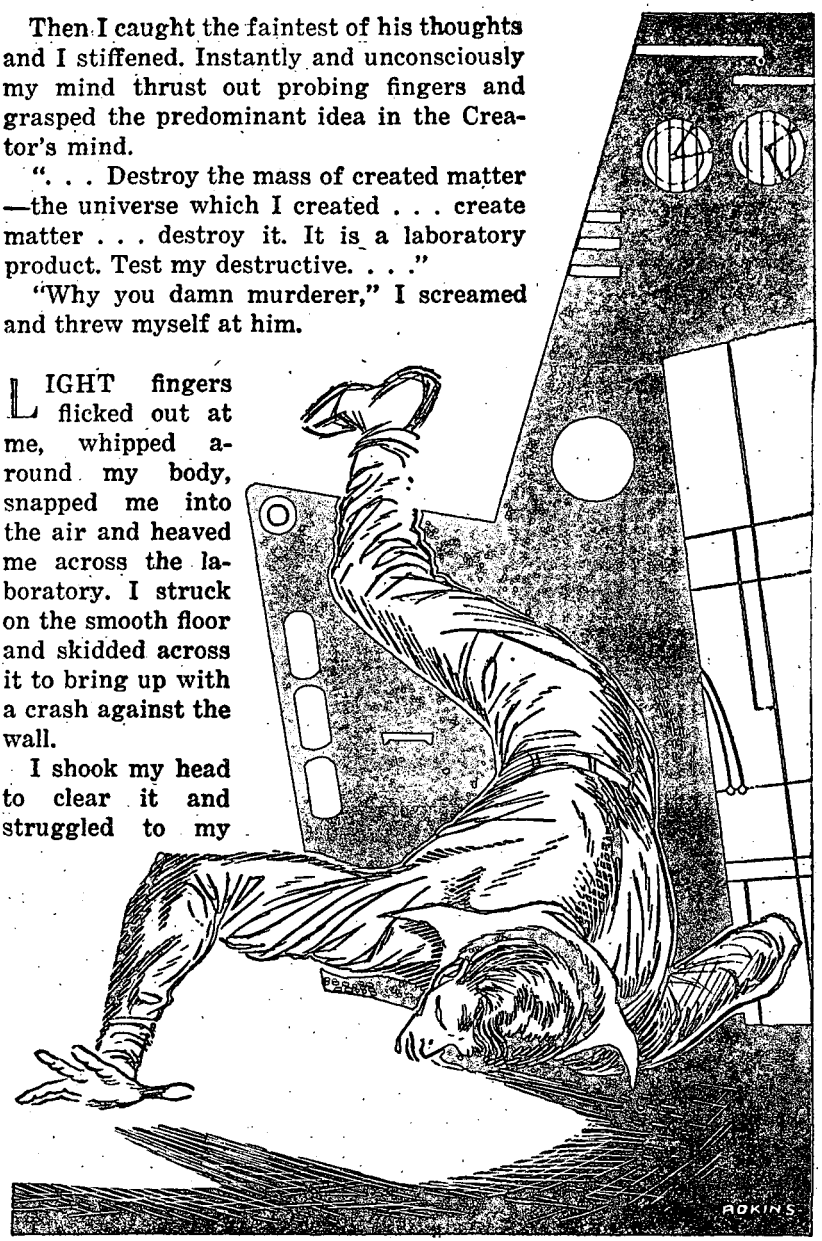
Then I caught the faintest of his thoughts and I stiffened. Instantly and unconsciously my mind thrust out probing fingers and grasped the predominant idea in the Creator's mind.

". . . Destroy the mass of created matter —the universe which I created . . . create matter . . . destroy it. It is a laboratory product. Test my destructive. . . ."

"Why you damn murderer," I screamed and threw myself at him.

LIGHT fingers flicked out at me, whipped around my body, snapped me into the air and heaved me across the laboratory. I struck on the smooth floor and skidded across it to bring up with a crash against the wall.

I shook my head to clear it and struggled to my



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feet. We must fight the Creator! Must save our world from destruction by the very creature who had created it!

I came to my feet with my muscles bunched, crouched in a fighting posture.

But the Creator had not moved. He stood in the same position and a rod of purple light extended between him and the queer machine of the walking-stick man. The rod of light seemed to be holding him there, frozen, immovable. Beside the machine stood the walking-stick-man, his hand on the lever, a mad glare in his eyes.

Scott was slapping the gangling fellow on his slender back.

"You've got the goods, old man," he was shouting. "That's one trick old frozen face didn't learn from you."

A thunderous tumult beat through my head. The machine of the walking-stick-man was not a transmission machine at all. It was a weapon—a weapon that could freeze the Creator into rigid lines.

Weird colors flowed through the Creator. Dead silence lay over the room. The machine of the walking-stick-man was silent, with no noise to hint of the great power it must have been developing. The purple rod did not waver. It was just a rigid rod of purple which had struck and stiffened the Creator.

I screamed at Scott: "Quick! The universe! He is going to destroy it!"

Scott leaped forward. Together we raced toward the table where the mass of created matter lay in its receptacle. Behind us padded the elephant-men.

As we reached the table, I felt a sinuous trunk wrap about me. With a flip I was hurled to the table top. It was but a step to the dish containing the universe. I snatched it up, dish and all, and handed it down to Scott. I let myself over the table edge, hung by my hands for an instant, and dropped. I raced after the others toward the work shop.

As we gained the room, the walking-stick-man made an adjustment on his machine. The purple rod faded away. The Creator, a towering cone of light, tottered for a moment and then glided swiftly for the doorway.

Instantly a sheet of purple radiance filled the opening. The Creator struck against it and was hurled back.

The radiance was swiftly arching overhead and curving beneath us, cutting through the floor, walls, and ceiling.

"He's enclosing us in a globe of that stuff," cried Scott. "It must be an energy screen of some sort, but I can't imagine what. Can you?"

"I don't care what it is, just

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so it works," I panted, anxiously.

Through the steady purple light I could see the Creator. Repeatedly he hurled himself against the screen and each time he was hurled back.

"We're moving," announced Scott.

The great purple globe was ascending, carrying in its interior we five universe-men, our machines, and fragments of the room in which we but recently had stood. It was cutting through the building like the flame of a torch through soft steel. We burst free of the building into the brilliant blue sunlight of that weird world.

Beneath us lay the building, a marvel of outre architecture, but with a huge circular shaft cut through it—the path of the purple globe. All about the building lay a forest of red and yellow vegetation, shaped as no vegetation of Earth is shaped, bent into hundreds of strange and alien forms.

Swiftly the globe sprang upward to hang in the air some distance above the building. As far as the eye could see stretched the painted forest. The laboratory we had just quitted was the only sign of habitation. No roads, no lakes, no rivers, no distant mountain—nothing relieved the level plain of red and yellow stretching away to faint horizons.

Was the Creator, I wondered, the sole denizen of this land? Was he the last survivor of a mystic race? Had there ever been a race at all? Might not the Creator be a laboratory product, even as the things he created were laboratory products? But if so, who or what had set to work the agents which resulted in that uncanny cone of energy?

MY REFLECTIONS were cut short as the walking-stick-man reached out his skinny hand for the mass of matter which Scott still held. As I watched him breathlessly, he laid it gently on a part of the floor which still remained in the globe and pulled a sliding rod from the side of the machine. A faint purple radiance sprang from the point of the rod, bathing the universe. The radiant purple surrounded the mass, grew thicker and thicker, seeming to congeal into layer after layer until the mass of matter lay sealed in a thick shell of the queer stuff. When I touched it, it did not appear to be hard or brittle. It was smooth and slimy to the touch, but I could not dent it with my fingers.

"He's building up the shell of the globe in just the same way," Scott said. "The machine seems to be projecting that purple stuff to the outside of the shell, where it is congealed into layers."

I noted that what he said was

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true. The shell of the globe had taken on a thickness that could be perceived, although the increased thickness did not seem to interfere with our vision.

Looking down at the laboratory, I could see some strange mechanism mounted on the roof of the building. Beside the massive mechanism stood the Creator.

"Maybe it's a weapon of some sort," suggested Scott.

Hardly had he spoken when a huge column of crimson light leaped forth from the machine. I threw up my hands to protect my eyes from the glare of the fiery column. For an instant the globe was bathed in the red glow, then a huge globule of red collected on its surface and leaped away, straight for the laboratory, leaving behind a trail of crimson.

The globe trembled to the force of the explosion as the ball of light struck. Where the laboratory had stood was merely a great hole, blasted to the primal rock beneath. The vegetation for great distances on either side was sifting ash. The Creator had disappeared. The colorful world beneath stretched empty to the horizon. The men of the universe had proven to be stronger than their Creator!

"If there's any more Creators around these parts," said Scott, smiling feebly, "they won't dare train another gun on this thing in the next million years. It gives them exactly what was meant for the other fellow; it crams their poison right down their own throats. Pete, that mass of matter, whether or not it is the universe, is saved. All hell couldn't get at it here."

The walking-stick-man, his mummy-like face impassive as ever, locked the controls of the machine. It was, I saw still operating, was still building up the shell of the globe. Second by second the globe was adding to its fortress—light strength. My mind reeled as I thought of it continuing thus throughout eternity.

The elephant-men were climbing into their machines.

Scott smiled wanly.

"The play is over," he said. "The curtain is down. It's time for us to go."

He stepped to the side of the walking-stick-man.

"I wish you would use our machine," he said, evidently forgetting our friend could understand no word he spoke. "You threw away your chance back there when you built this contraption instead of a transmitter. Our machine will take you wherever you wish to go."

He pointed to the machine and to the universe, then tapped his head. With the strange being at his side, he walked to our ma-

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chine, pointed out the controls, explained its use in pantomime.

"I don't know if he understands," said Scott, "but I did the best I could."

As I walked past the walking-stick-man to step into the time-power machine, I believe I detected a faint flicker of a smile on his face. Of that, however, I can never be sure.

MAROONED IN TIME

I KNOW how the mistake was made. I was excited when I stepped into the machine. My mind was filled with the many strange happenings I had witnessed. I thought along space directional lines, *but I forgot to reckon the factor of time.*

I thought of the Earth, but I did not consider time. I willed myself to be back on Earth, but I forgot to will myself in any particular time era. Consequently when Scott shoved over the lever, I was shot to Earth, but the time element was confused.

I realize that life in the super-universe of the Creator, being billions of times larger than life upon the Earth, was correspondingly slower. Every second in the super-universe was equal to years of Earth-time. My life in the Creator's universe had equaled millions of years of terran existence.

I believe that my body was projected along a straight line and not along the curve which was necessary to place me back in the twentieth century.

This is theory, of course. There might have been some fault in the machine. The purple globe might have exerted some influence to distort our calculations.

Be that as it may, I reached a dying planet. It has been given to me, a man of the twentieth century, to live out the last years of my life on my home planet some millions of years later than the date of my birth. I, a resident of a comparatively young dynasty in the history of the Earth, now am tribal chieftain and demi-god of the last race, a race that is dying even as the planet is dying.

As I sit before my cave or huddle with the rest of my clan around a feeble fire, I often wonder if Scott Marston was returned to Earth in his proper time. Or is he, too, a castaway in some strange time? Does he still live? Did he ever reach the Earth? I often feel that he may even now be searching through the vast corridors of time and the deserts of space for me, his one-time partner in the wildest venture ever attempted by man.

And often, too, I wonder if the walking-stick-man used our time-power machine to return to his native planet. Or is he a prisoner in his own trap, caught

(continued on page 114)

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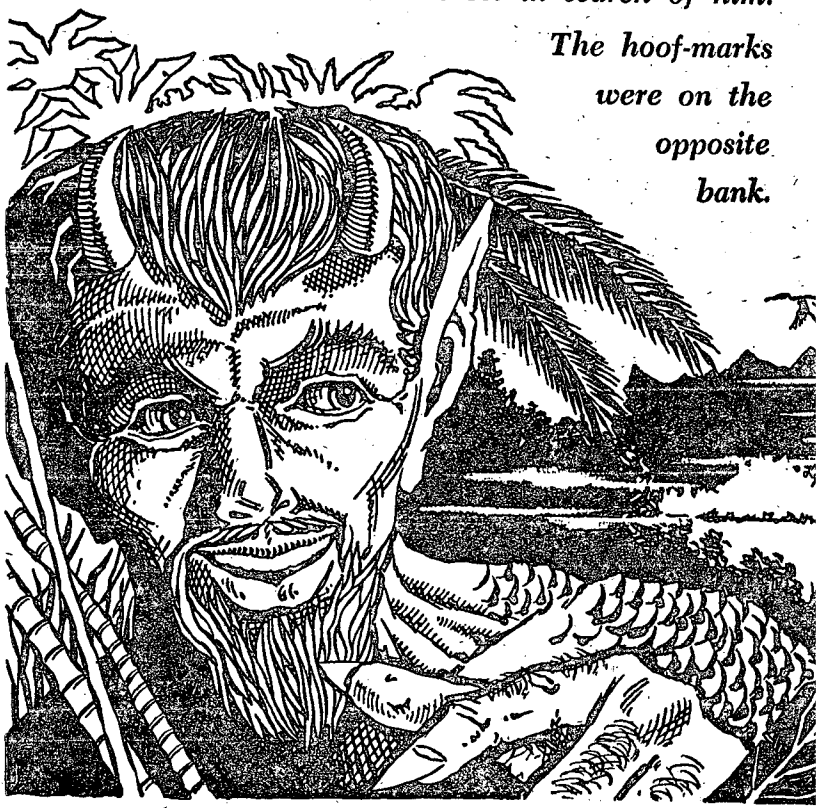
the FOREST of

By ROBERT F. YOUNG

Mortby saw the hoof-marks first. It was the morning Reinman had come up missing, and he and the four other remaining members of the expedition had set out into the Kontawaba Forest in search of him. The hoof-marks were on the opposite bank.



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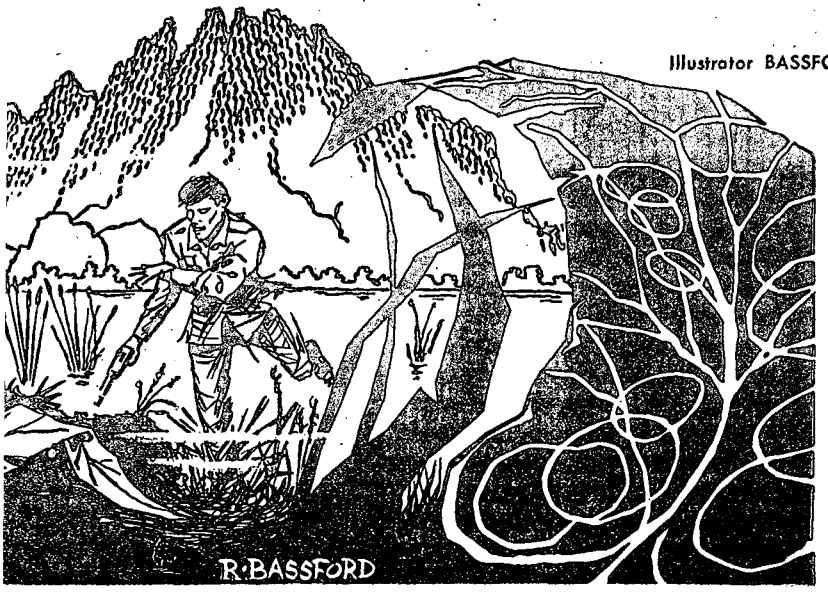
UNREASON

MORTBY held up his hand as a signal for the other to halt, and waded through the shallow water. He was not officially in charge of the expedition, but having talked the Office of Galactic Research into organizing it, he felt justified in taking command during an emergency such as this one. There were two series of marks, he saw when he reached the other side of the brook; one series led out of the forest, the other, back into it; and each mark, he noted further, was split down the middle by a narrow prominence. In addition to the hoof-marks, there was a pair of rounded impressions at the water's edge, clearly indicating that the creature—whatever it was—had knelt down by the brook to drink.

Mortby's heart pounded. He had been sure from the very first moment he had heard about Telisthawwa that he was on the track of an extraterrestrial parallel of the Pan-satyr myth; but this was the first real indication



Illustrator BASSFORD

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he had had to date that the Kontawaba goat man existed. Moreover, he had been afraid all along that Telisthawwa was a creature of the past and that the tales which the Kontawaba plain-natives had recounted to him had been handed down to them from their forebears. He knew now that such was not the case.

He straightened from his scrutiny of the knee-prints and faced the other members of the party across the narrow brook—lean-visaged Bruce Summerton, auburn-haired Anita Morrison, tearful-eyed Sophia Mazur, goddess-contoured June Vondreau. Anxiety and curiosity commingled on each countenance, anxiety predominating on Sophia's. She and Reinman had been in love. "I'm going on ahead for a ways," Mortby said. "Wait here till I get back."

The ground hardened in ratio to its distance from the brook, and the cloven hoof-marks petered out before he had gone a dozen yards. He stood for a while, knee-deep in ferns and flowers, contemplating the fissured, dark-leafed trees, fighting back a strange sense of uneasiness; then he made his way back to the brook. The others had crossed it during his absence and were standing on the nearer bank, staring at the marks.

Sophia Mazur looked up quickly at his re-appearance. "I'm not sure," he said in answer to the anxious query in her brown eyes, "but I doubt very much if Reinman was abducted. The depth and size of the hoof-prints certainly don't indicate a being of unusual size, and Reinman's no weakling. For all we know, he may have just taken a notion to get up and go exploring on his own hook."

"In the middle of the night and without any clothes on?" Sophia shook her head. "You don't believe that any more than I do, Alan."

Mortby shrugged. "In any event, we're wasting our time here," he said. "We'll take a different route back to camp—maybe we'll run across some sign of him."

THEY started out, Mortby in the lead. The forest was an enchanted place of trees and flowers and shady glens; of ponds and reed-rimmed lakes; of heady fragrances borne on gentle winds. Mortby had fallen in love with it at first sight, but it was not love that had caused him to return. It was the scent of the fame which a discovery such as the one he was sure he was about to make would bring him. He was an ardent mythologist, Mortby was, and a euhemerist to boot. Not only did he devoutly believe that parallels of all terrestrial mythologies existed throughout

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the galaxy, but he believed as well that each of them would prove to have roots in reality. He had already found euhemeristic parallels of the Odinic pantheon, the *Mahabharata*, and the Babylonian Creation Epic on planets hundreds of light years removed from Earth; now, on Deneb 12, civilization's most far-flung outpost, he was on the verge of finding a euhemeristic parallel of the Pansatyr myth.

At the moment, however, he was more interested in finding Reinman.

June Vondreau overtook him and matched her pace with his. He was annoyed. Ever since the expedition had been organized, she had attached herself to him —in much the same manner as Sophia had attached herself to Reinman and Anita had attached herself to Summerton. He had never gone along with the Office of Galactic Research's theory that an expedition functioned more effectively when its members were of the same age-group and paired off equally as to sex. He had a neat, well-functioning mind, Mortby did, in which sex was filed under "S" and work was filed under "W", and while at thirty-one he was not naive enough to think that sex could be dispensed with altogether, his trips to the "S" file were far less numerous than were his trips to the "W" file, and he got them over with as quickly as possible.

June Vondreau shouted sex. Every line of her bespoke it; her walk gave it iambic pentameter. Her hyacinth hair lent it classical overtones and her blue eyes gave it depth. In an earlier age she would have been an ad man's dream; in this one she had wound up as a frustrated mythologist with a Freudian chip on her shoulder. "It was a satyr, wasn't it?" she said.

He was reluctant to share his hopes with her. "Why a satyr?" he countered. "Why not a wild goat?"

"A wild goat with two legs? I saw the tracks too, Alan—and I also saw the knee-prints by the water. It was a satyr, and you know it."

"A variant of one, perhaps," he conceded. "Or perhaps a variant of Pan himself. The goat man which the natives describe ties in more with a major deity. So do their periodic sacrifices—though I've never been able to make head or tail of them beyond the fact that they're based on some form of animism."

"To me, the practice of sending a pair of newlyweds into an idyllic forest smacks more of some kind of sex-worship."

"To you, it probably does," Mortby said wryly.

THEY had emerged from the forest and were walking to-

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ward the camp. It had more of the aspect of a village than it did a camp. Six plastitents, their adroitly painted sides and roofs lending a three-dimensional effect of early-American clapboards and shingles, formed a street leading up to the combination mess- and recreation-tent, the sides and roof of which appeared to be constructed of brick and tile respectively, but which in reality were formed of the same all-purposed plastic that constituted the sole construction material of the "houses". Next to the rec-mess tent—as the members of the expedition had come to call it—was parked the cat-tracked turbo-truck that had transported them across the plain from the frontier-city of B'krowan two days ago.

Belatedly it occurred to Mortby that he should have posted a guard, but in the confusion that had ensued the discovery of Reinman's disappearance, the idea simply had not entered his mind. However, a hasty search of the seven tents revealed no sign that anything had been disturbed.

They adjourned to the rec-mess tent for the midday meal. Sophia said no word, and there was a faraway quality in her brown eyes that had not been there before. Mortby noticed it absently, thought no more about it till, throwing his vacuum-containers into the waste-eater, he saw that she was no longer in the tent. "Where's Sophia?" he asked.

The others looked blank for a moment. Presently Anita Morrison shrugged. "Probably in her tent. I don't think she was very hungry."

"Take a look, will you?"

Anita returned, breathless. "Her tent's empty. Do you think—"

Mortby didn't think—he knew. "I should have guessed she'd go out looking for him again. But I thought she'd have more sense than to go alone."

Summerton stood up from the table. "Well, we might as well go after her," he said.

Mortby shook his head. "No. The rest of you stay here. I'll go after her. If we spend all our time looking for each other we'll never accomplish anything."

Before setting out, he made sure his photon pistol was charged properly. Telisthawwa would be no good to him dead, but just the same, his own skin came first, and he intended to safeguard it. He made no attempt to pick up Sophia's trail, but made a bee-line for the brook on the bank of which they had found the hoof-marks, correctly deducing that she had done likewise. Once a woman like Sophia made up her mind that something was true no amount of reasoning was apt to dissuade

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her; hence, still convinced despite Mortby's argument to the contrary, that Telisthawwa had carried her true love off, she was probably determined to find the goat man's lair and effect a single-handed rescue.

Once he gained the farther bank of the brook, it did not take him long to find her footprints. They were intermingled with the series of hoof-marks that led away from the brook, and some of them were superimposed upon his own. He was just about to follow them into the forest when he heard her scream.

It was a scream of purest horror, and for a moment he was so shocked that he could not move. Recovering himself, he plunged forward in the direction from which it had come. The scream sounded again—farther away now—and in its wake came the pounding of hoofs. Suddenly there was a loud splash. The silence that ensued was deafening.

MORTBY ran through the shouting silence, photon pistol drawn. Branches slapped him repeatedly, vines entangled themselves around his legs and arms, roots tripped him. He hardly noticed. The pounding of hoofs still rang in his ears, crowding his concern for Sophia from his mind, and he saw the mental picture his thoughts had drawn of Telisthawwa from the description given him by the plain-natives. He saw the scaled shoulders and the gray torso; the hirsute upper legs, and the fleshless tufted shinbones terminating in cloven hoofs. He saw the V-shaped face with its green eyes and blood-red lips; the apostrophe-like horns surmounting the white forehead, the straight black hair and the pointed ears. And the anthropologist in him was fascinated and the puritan in him was repelled.

At length he broke free from the forest and paused on the grassy shore of a lake. It was a small lake, and its waters were a vivid blue. Reeds grew thickly in the shallows along its shore, and the grass near the water's edge was green and riotous. He saw the impressions which Sophia's sandals had made in the soft ground that bordered the reed-rampant shallows, and he saw the hoof-prints that partially covered them and continued on beyond them. The water was roiled where the sandal prints ceased, but Sophia was nowhere to be seen.

He stripped down to his underclothing, cached his pistol in one of his shoes and cleared the reeds in a shallow dive. Emerging, he surface-dived and scouted the muddy bottom. He saw no sign of her. Swimming farther out, he surface-dived again. The water was clearer here, but the bot-

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tom was just as empty. He gave up and swam back to shore. Sophia had surely drowned by now, and there was no point in wasting his efforts further. Mortby was by nature a practical man.

A faint movement on the opposite shore caught his attention, and raising his eyes, he saw the goat man staring at him across the blue water. The creature was standing in bushes up to its waist, but the visible parts of it were precisely in accordance with the plain-natives' description of Telisthawwa. However, the reality was so much more vivid than Mortby's mental picture that an involuntary gasp escaped his lips. He had never seen eyes quite so green nor lips quite so red. The scaled arms and shoulders were loathesome. The gray body turned his stomach. The apostrophe-horns were somehow obscene.

Afterward Mortby could not remember how long Telisthawwa stood there before blending back into the forest. All he could remember was the mockery in the green eyes, and the feeling of repugnance that afflicted him. Presently the distant pounding of hoofs apprised him that he had been alone for some time, and then the sound of the hoofs died away and the silence was complete.

THE SUN had set by the time Mortby got back to camp, and the sky had taken out that intense and vivid blueness that invariably precedes the fall of darkness in Deneb 12's temperate zones. He called a meeting in the rec-mess tent and gave the others a brief account of what had happened. Anita's face was pale when he finished; June's bore an expression that seemed half compounded of fear and half compounded of fascination. Summerton's lean countenance was grim. "She must have drowned trying to escape from it," he said. "It's funny, though, that you couldn't find her body."

"We'll try diving for it tomorrow," Mortby said. "Too bad we didn't bring an aqua-lung."

"Listen!" Anita said suddenly.

The sound was tenuous at first, gradually took on substance and form, as the sad, fluted melody grew louder. They stepped outside the rec-mess tent and stood in the twilight beneath the intensely blue sky, and the mournful tune drifted over the statuesque trees to their ears, oddly familiar somehow, yet hopelessly unidentifiable; rising gently for a while, then fading back into tenuousness and finally dying away.

There was a long, empty silence. Then, "Syrinx," Summerton said. "Panpipes."

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Mortby nodded. Telisthawwa, in common with his long-extinct terrestrial cousin, was a musician. A thread of thought began in his mind, broke when he gripped it with too-eager mental fingers. It had had something to do with the lake and the reeds and Telisthawwa's laughter, and with the fluted melody. But it was gone now, and for the life of him, he could not retrieve it.

"I can stand a drink," June said suddenly. "How about the rest of you?"

"Just one," Summerton said. "Then I'm going to bed."

"We're going to have to stand watch," Mortby said.

Summerton nodded. "All right. But you'll have to take the first trick. All this tramping around has worn me out, and I've got to get some rest. My feet are killing me."

Mortby frowned. Before retiring the previous evening, Reinman had complained about his feet too. Was there a connection? Abruptly Mortby put the matter from his mind. Attaching significance to so common a human malady as aching feet was the acme of asininity. "I'll wake you around one," he told Summerton. Turning, he accepted the drink which June had mixed for him. "*Prosit*," he said, raising the transparent container to his lips.

She rasied her own container, took a reflective sip. "Somehow I get the impression," she said, "that you saw more at the lake than you've told us."

"If I did, it didn't register on my mind. To the best of my knowledge, Sophia leaped into the water and was drowned."

"But she was a good swimmer. She may have swum across the lake and joined Telisthawwa on the other side. You don't know for sure that she didn't."

"Yes I do—and if you'd ever met Telisthawwa face to face, you'd know that she didn't too."

June swirled the contents of her container. "Oh, I don't know. He sounds like he might be kind of cute."

Mortby looked at her in disgust. Anita and Summerton had stepped outside, and he and June had the tent to themselves. At length he said, "You're overplaying it a little, aren't you?"

"Am I? I don't think so. Satyrs have always intrigued me. I don't think *I'd* run from one."

The half-smile on her thin though sensuous lips suggested that she might be kidding. But somehow he did not think that she was. "Is that why you volunteered for this expedition?" he asked.

"Part of the reason. The other part was you. Surely you know that by this time."

"You've made it obvious

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enough. But why should you be attracted to me?"

She took another sip of her drink. "I don't know, really. Maybe it's because of the way you smile sometimes. Maybe it's because of the way you part your hair. Does a person ever really know why someone appeals to them? Anyway, I think you'd be loads of fun if you'd exorcise the puritan in you."

"Maybe there's a puritan in you too," he countered. "Why is it you've never married? You're twenty-six at least, and I'm sure you've never wanted for matrimonial offers."

"Twenty-seven," she said, "and the offers have been legion. But I've already told you why. The why is you. Unconsciously I've been waiting for you ever since I was seventeen. But I didn't bargain on the puritan in you. Why don't you exorcise him once and for all?"

"And unleash the satyr?"

Unexpectedly she colored. "That isn't what I meant at all," she said.

"Isn't it? If I exorcised the puritan, who would hold the satyr back?"

"I—I wouldn't know." Suddenly she set down her drink. "I think I'll go to bed now," she said. "I have a headache. Good night."

"Good night," Mortby said quietly.

AFTER she left he went outside and looked at the sky. The night was warm but the air was miraculously free from haze, and each star stood out bright and clear. A faint wind was blowing, and the pale treetops of the forest sighed softly in the night. He lowered his eyes. In Anita's tent, a light still burned. Summerton's tent was in darkness. As Mortby looked, June's light went out, and he pictured her slipping between scented sheets, attired in negligee as tenuous as mist. His thoughts returned to her paradoxical behavior in the rec-mess tent. Why should the term "satyr" fascinate her, he wondered, when it was applied in a literal sense, and yet repel her when it was applied in a figurative sense?

But he did not wonder long, for presently Telisthawwa came into his mind. Was the creature an ordinary satyr, or was it Pan—god of flocks and fields and forests, piper of sad melodies on a syrinx fashioned with its own hands? Perhaps it was both. In any event, it was Telisthawwa whom Mortby was interested in—not June. The puritan in him had set the scientist in him free, and stood guard at the dungeon door behind which the satyr in him languished; and that was the way it should be, the way he wanted it to be, and the way it

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was going to be as long as he had anything to say about it.

At one-thirty he entered Summerton's tent and switched on the light. Summerton sat up in bed, blinking his eyes. Sweat shone on his forehead. "Time to take over," Mortby said. "You look a little white around the gills—feel all right?"

Summerton pressed the heels of his hands against his forehead. "Headache," he mumbled. Then, "Go on to bed. I'll be okay."

Mortby did so. Next morning, when he awoke, Summerton was gone.

IT WAS Anita who brought him the news. There were headlines in her frightened eyes when she stepped into his tent, and the story that tumbled from her lips was an anticlimax. He cut it short, and after dressing hurriedly, headed for Summerton's tent.

June was already there when he and Anita came up. The grass before the entrance was trampled, but not abnormally so. Inside, everything was in order, and Summerton's clothing lay neatly over the back of the chair beside the bed. Under the bed, his shoes stood side by side. Either he had not bothered to dress after Mortby had awakened him, or he had returned later on and undressed all over again. In any event, he, in common with Reinman, had wandered off in his underclothing.

The more thought Mortby gave to the matter, the more difficult he found it to go on believing that Reinman—and now Summerton—had voluntarily wandered off at all. He was inclined to believe now that Telisthawwa had somehow engineered the two abductions. But why? It could be argued, certainly, that the goat man's motivation in carrying off Reinman had been to lure Sophia into the forest, but why hadn't it simply carried off Sophia in the first place?

Perhaps the answer lay in the plain-natives' custom of sacrificing a newly-mated couple on the eve of every harvest and on the eve of every spring. So far as Mortby had been able to ascertain from the verbal accounts given to him by the various natives he had queried, the couple simply walked into the forest and never returned, but the accounts had abounded in innumerable esoteric expressions that defied interpretation—expressions such as "free the forest and feed the fields", "the time comes for Telisthawwa to be born anew", and "what sad song is this the lonely shepherd hears upon the twilight?—it is the song that says the master is appeased". Perhaps if he could understand the meaning behind them, he would be able to solve

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the problem that confronted him; but for the life of him he could not make head nor tail of any of them.

June was standing at his elbow, staring at the empty shoes beneath the bed. "There's not the slightest sign of a struggle," she said. "He must have left of his own free will."

"I don't think so," Mortby said.

"I didn't remember to tell you last night," she went on, "and Bruce and Anita must have forgotten too, but while you were looking for Sophia, the three of us took a dozen fluoro-depth shots of the forest-floor. Do you recall the theory Reinman had about the tees having a common root system? Well he was right. The forest is actually one tree—the collective outgrowth of a single seed. Reinman called it the Arcadian seed."

"Which means, I suppose," Mortby said, instantly resenting Reinman's trespassing upon a field which he thought of as belonging solely to himself, "that the original Arcadian forest and this one sprang from a common ancestor."

"Why not? Personally I find it easier to believe that the Pan-satyr myth was the natural result of a particular ecology and that the mythical Arcadian forest and the present one sprang from identical seeds, than I find it to believe that two almost identical religions could have come about through pure chance . . . Where's Anita?"

Mortby swung around. The tent was empty. Hurrying to the doorway, he looked out upon an empty street. The treetops of the forest were swaying lazily—insolently, it seemed—in the morning wind. He ran toward Anita's tent, June just behind him. It was empty. He swore. "After what happened to Sophia, how could she have been such a fool as to go after him alone!" he said.

June was looking reflectively at the forest. "Who knows?" she said. "Maybe Telisthawwa called her."

"Nonsense! Come on, if we hurry we may be able to overtake her."

HE headed straight for the lake, June following in his footsteps. They heard Anita's scream long before they reached it. Her footprints, partially trampled by hoof-marks the way Sophia's had been, made a tragic little trail along the shore and ceased abruptly near the water's edge. The reeds grew more riotously than ever. "How could she have been such a fool!" Mortby said again.

Beside him, June gasped. "Look—over there, across the lake!"

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He knew what he would see even before he raised his eyes. The satyr's face was like a sickly V-shaped flower. The blood-red lips were twisted in a mocking grin. The scaled shoulders and arms made him think of gray rotting logs. In a fit of revulsion, he drew his photon pistol, raised and aimed it.

June knocked it from his hands. "How dare you even think of killing it!" she said. "It's beautiful!"

He bent down to retrieve the pistol and when he straightened, Telisthawwa was gone. His hands were trembling. "Beautiful, you say!" he rasped. "It's evil—obscene. It's Pan, don't you see? And Pan was the prototype of Satan!"

She moistened dry lips, looked away from him. "I forgot about the puritan in you. Naturally it would seem evil to you. Shall we go back to camp?"

They made the return trip in silence. As they were emerging from the forest, Mortby became aware of a sharp pain in his toes, and as soon as he gained his tent he removed his shoes. The pain diminished slightly but did not go away. He spent the afternoon catching up on his notes, surveyed them glumly when he had finished. With two members of the expedition missing and two of them dead, he would have to return to B'krowan and report to the local branch of the Office of Galactic Research. With luck, they would give him another chance. More probably, though, they would turn the matter over to the proper authorities and someone else would get the credit for establishing a parallel between the Kontawaba religion and the Pan-satyr myth.

He joined June in a desultory meal in the rec-mess tent. The syrinx sounded just as they were finishing, and they went outside to listen. This time, the tune was even sadder than before. Again there was that hopelessly unidentifiable familiarity, the gentle rise and fall and fading into tenuousness; the mournful dying away.

June's face was white. "We've got to leave, Alan. We can't risk staying another second. Something terrible is going on; I don't know what it is, but I—I sense it somehow."

Mortby shook his head. "We can't travel by night—I'm not familiar enough with the route. We'll leave tomorrow morning. Right now, I'm going to lie down. My feet are killing me."

For a moment she stared at him in horror, then she ran down the street to her tent. Presently he heard the click of the zipper-lock as she sealed the door shut. He felt strangely detached, as though he no longer quite belonged where he was, as though

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he was no longer quite Mortby. His head began to ache. The pain in his toes intensified, spread to the soles of his feet. He could hardly wait till he reached his tent and could take his shoes off.

He lay down on his cot, but he had no intention of falling to sleep. If his theory was right and Telisthawwa had engineered both Reinman's and Summerton's abductions, then Telisthawwa was due to show up again, and he, Mortby, would be there waiting for him. For some reason the idea of waiting there in the tent for the goat man contained an element of irony, and he was amused. He giggled in the darkness. The pain in his feet climbed into his shins, and his head started to throb.

Despite himself, he dozed off. How long he slept he did not know but however long it might have been it had not been long enough to soothe the pain in his feet or the throbbing in his head. The pain had climbed all the way up to his knees now, and the throbbing had concentrated itself along the top of his forehead. Raising his hands, he discovered that there were two hard lumps just beneath the skin.

Suddenly the pain left his feet and legs, and the throbbing of his forehead faded away. Sitting up in bed, he swung his feet to the floor. They made a hollow sound as they struck the plastic flooring. He was not surprised. Nor was he surprised when, raising his hand to his forehead again, he felt the two newly-sprouted horns. The new thinness and the altered pattern of his face did not surprise him either, and it seemed no more than natural that his shoulders and arms should be scaled and that his upper legs should be covered with shaggy hair. His short goat-like tail did not disconcert him in the least. Only a very small part of him was Mortby now. The rest of him was Telisthawwa. He was the forest now—the forest personified in human flesh.

TELISTHAWWA stood up in the darkness and made his way to the doorway, his cloven hoofs resounding on the plastic floor. Outside, he trotted down the street and entered the forest. The feathery touch of ferns and foliage thrilled him, and he shed the underclothing that still clung to his body and gave his limbs full rein. As always, he regretted that personification could not be sustained for longer than a single day, and he regretted too that the new body he had absorbed would, when it came time for him to become the forest again, be absorbed by the forest in turn. Three freedoms in as many days had spoiled him, and he wanted to be free forever.

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All night he ran through fern-paved aisles and grassy glades, pausing now and then to drink from a star-pebbled brook or pond; and all the while he ran, a sweet thought—born of data culled from Mortby's brain, coursed deliciously through his mind: *This one will not flee from me. She looked at me and perceived the beauty which the others could not see, and she did not turn away.* Morning found him waiting for her by the lake. She would come, he knew, for even now, the ganglion of his forest-self was sending out the mesmeric waves that would bring her, moist-lipped and wanting, to his side—

Hark!—were those her footsteps now?

Standing in shadows, he watched her step from the forest, goddess-coutoured and midnight of hair, and walk diffidently down to the lake, and the sight of her was sweet. She had not seen him yet, and ravenous for the look of longing that he was sure would settle on her face, he moved out of the shadows into the sunlight and softly spoke her name.

She turned then, and her eyes went wide. With admiration? No, not admiration—fear. The part of Telisthawwa that was Mortby, gloated. It had been the puritan in him, he realized now that had attracted her to him in the first place. The sex she so brazenly advertised was no more than a subconscious cover-up, a camouflage calculated to deflect attention from her spinster horror of the flesh. She had been able to see beauty in Telisthawwa only because she had been unable to conceive of a relationship between the satyr and herself. Now, with the relationship imminent, she saw, not beauty, but bestiality, and she knew a loathing greater even than the loathing Sophia and Anita must have known, and in a moment she would scream and flee the way they—and how many others before them?—had screamed and fled—

Just as Syrinx had fled from Pan in a similar forest long ago —to become a bed of reeds . . .

Mortby understood everything then. But the knowledge was not destined to bring him fame.

SADLY Telisthawwa watched her turn and run along the shore of the lake, her scream ringing in his ears. Then, instinctively, he set off in pursuit. When the waters leaped up and seized her and drew her down into the mud, he did not run on as he had before, because now there was no one left to flee from. Instead he waited by the water's edge, and presently he saw the first tender shoots of the new reed-bed break the surface. The

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forest had behaved in keeping with its kind.

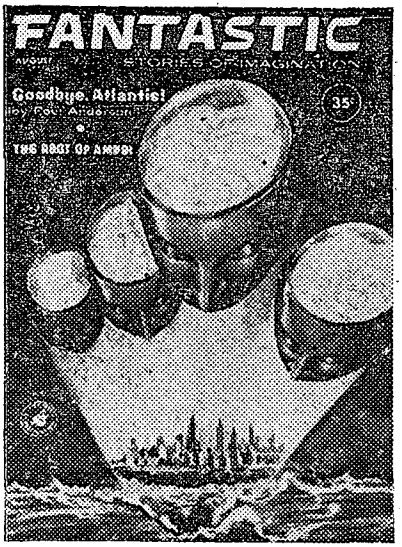
He chose the choicest shoots and spent the rest of the day fashioning the syrinx, and when it was finished he sat down on a grassy bank beneath a gnarled tree, and there by waters bluer than her eyes had been, he sounded the first sad sweet note of her.

And Pan did after Syrinx speed
Not as a nymph, but for a reed.
—Andrew Marvell: *Thoughts in a Garden*

THE END

COMING NEXT MONTH

Poul Anderson celebrates his return to the pages of FANTASTIC with a typically exciting novelet in the August issue. Its title: "Goodbye, Atlantis!"



Its theme: how to tell the difference between a demon and a god. And almost in passing, Anderson gives his own unique version of the facts back of the drowning of legendary Atlantis.

The August FANTASTIC features, as a Classic Reprint, the famous "Root of Ampoi," by that master of fantasy, **Clark Ashton Smith. Keith Laumer** also returns with another action packed tale of adventure and intrigue in his newest novelet, "Stranger in Paradox."

Other novelets, shorts and features round out the issue. The August FANTASTIC will be on sale at your newsstand July 18.

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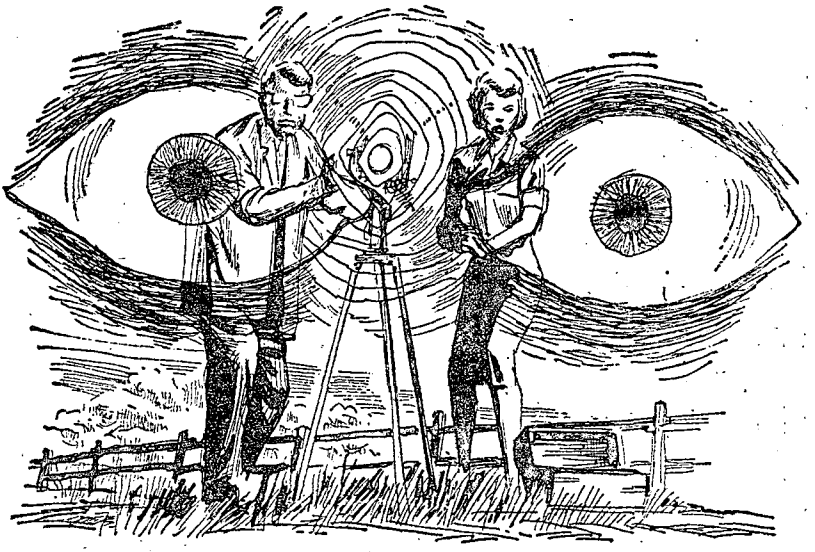
No Harm Done

By JACK SHARKEY

Illustrator SUMMERS



Humorist Sharkey puts away his jester's cap to write a chilling tale that never telegraphs—and only once, subtly, hints at—its shocking ending.

THE BOY was a good-looking youth, with shiny—if overlong—blond hair, and bright white teeth. But his eyes were cloudy with the emptiness that lay behind them, and the blue circles of their irises hinted at no more mental activity than do the opaque black dots on a rag doll. He sat with vacuous docility upon the small metal stool the guards had provided, and let his arms dangle limp as broken clothesline at his sides, not even

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crossing them in his lap. He had been led to the chair, told to sit, and left. If he were not told to arise, he would remain there until the dissolution of his muscle cells following death by starvation caused him to topple from his low perch.

"Total schizophrenia," said Dr. Manton. "For all practical purposes, he is an ambulant—when instructed to move, of course—vegetable."

"How terrible," said Lisa, albeit perfunctorily. Lisa Nugent, for all her lovely twenty-seven years, was a trained psychologist, and rarely allowed emotion to take her mind from its well-ordered paths of analysis. To be unfeeling was heartless— But to become emotional about a patient was pointless.

"Yes, it's intolerable," nodded Dr. Jeff Manton, keeping his mind strictly on Lisa's scientific qualifications, and deliberately blocking out any other information sent to his brain by his alert senses. The warmth of her smile, the flash of sunlight in her auburn hair, the companionable lilt she could not keep out of her "on-duty" voice— All these were observed, noted, and filed for future reference. At the moment, nothing must go wrong with their capacity for observation of the patient. Emotion had a way of befuddling even the most dedicated minds.

"But why out here?" Lisa said suddenly, returning the conversation to a prior topic. "I should think conditions would be easier to control in the lab."

"Simply because," said Jeff, patting the small metal camera-like device on its rigid tripod, "I as yet have no experimental knowledge of the range of my machine. It may simply be absorbed by the plaster in the walls, back inside the sanatarium. Then again, it may penetrate, likely or not, even the steel beams of the building, with roentgenic ease. There are too many other people in the building, Li—Dr. Nugent. Until I can be certain just what effect the rays have upon a human brain, I dare not use it any place where there might be leakage, possible synaptic damage."

"I understand," said Lisa, nodding after a brief smile at his near-slip with her name. "You assume the earth will absorb any rays that pass beyond this boy's brain, and render them—if not harmless—at least beyond the contamination point with another human being."

"Precisely," said Jeff Manton, moving the tripod a short distance closer to the seated boy. "Now, I want you to assist me in watching him, and if you note in him any change—either in his expression or posture—tell me at once. Then we can turn off

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the machine and test him for results. For positive results, at any rate."

LISA could not repress a slight tremor. The trouble with schizophrenia in its most advanced stage was the inability of contacting the patient. The boy, although readily capable of executing simple commands, could not be counted on to aid Dr. Manton nor herself in even the most basic test of his mental abilities. If the machine made him any worse—there would hardly be a way for them to discover it. If better—then new hope was born for other similarly afflicted.

"Steady, now," said Jeff, turning the tiny knob at the side of the metal box a quarter turn. "Keep your eye on him. I'm going to turn it on."

Lisa felt the sweat prickling along her back as Jeff flicked the toggle switch atop the box. Her eyes began to burn, and she realized she wasn't even blinking as she locked her gaze upon the figure of the boy through whose brain was now coursing a ray of relatively unknown effect. Rabbits and rats and monkeys in the lab were one thing. This, now, was a human being. Whether the effect upon him would be similar to that of the ray upon test-animals (scientifically driven crazy before exposure) remained to be seen.

"Anything?" muttered Jeff, sighting anxiously along the side of the box. "Anything at *all*?"

"He—No. He just sits there, Doctor. So far as I can see, there is no appreciable effect." She sighed resignedly. "He doesn't even flicker a muscle."

"Damn," said Jeff. He kept his finger lightly atop the sun-glinting toggle switch. "I'm going to give it one more minute before I give up. This thing *should* be vitalizing his brain by *now!*"

"But he's not even—" Lisa began, discouraged.

"Keep your eyes on *him*, damn it!" snapped Jeff, catching the turn of her head from the corner of his eye. "This *must* work! We daren't miss the least sign that it has!"

Man and woman stood side by side in the hot light of the afternoon sun, staring, staring at the immobile form of the patient, the patient whose disrupted mind they were attempting to reunite into an intelligent whole . . .

My name, he thought. *Funny, I should know my own name. I've heard it often enough . . . It's . . . Is it—is it Garret? That sounds like it, but—I can't seem to recall . . .*

He thought about the man who tended and took care of him. He had called him by name, hadn't he? And it was most certainly Garret. Yes, of course it was Garret. . . . Or was it Curt?

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His mind, like badly exposed film, refused to give him an accurate sensation, from any of his senses. All he got for strenuous mental gymnastics was vague, blurry reception and muddled thought. And yet, there was a warm sensation that had never been in his mind before—Before what? Try as he might, he could not recall anything coherent before this moment in time. Just vague feelings of being alive, and simply growing up . . .

THE warmth of the sun was beginning to penetrate. He could feel it, coursing down upon him, soaking into him, revitalizing him . . . But it was unlike this other warmth, this *penetrating* warmth, that tingled through his mind. With the awareness of the sunlight came a slow awareness of shades of light, then of color, then of figures. And, for the first time, he made a strong effort, and—and *looked.*

He saw the man and woman standing in the sunlight a few feet from himself, saw the harsh glitter of that sunlight upon the strange object on three legs that rested on the ground before them. He tried to speak to them, but something restrained him.

If I can move . . . If I can just move a little bit, he realized, *they'll see me, and they'll know I'm alive and well and aware.*

He tried. He tried desperately to move. His body felt rigid, imprisoned. Just a little frantic, he thought of blinking at them, of moving his eyes toward them for sharp definite focus, so that they would *know* . . .

Nothing happened.

I'm paralyzed! he thought for a terrifying moment. Then—*No, I'm just not used to directing myself. I haven't the necessary coordination or experience, that must be it. Take it easy, now. Slow and easy. Don't panic.*

He strained desperately, and felt just the slightest hint of movement. Had they seen? he wondered. He was certain he had moved. What was the *matter* with the two of them?!

He watched them there in the sunlight, this man and woman who stood so intensely still, the man's hand upon that metallic thing on three legs. Then he knew that that thing was the source of the warmth in his mind. It had brought him to awareness.

But what good *is it!* his mind screamed. *To be alive and aware, and unable to let them know it!* The coldly frantic feeling was growing within him, now, taking hold of his brain with the frightening fingers of raw panic.

"Look!" he cried out, then knew with crushing despair that the word had gone no farther than his brain. *Please,* he begged

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silently, *see me here, see that I am alive, that I am not what I was!*

Desperately, he strove to rise, felt the strange sensation of bondage that restrained his body, fought it . . . and won. It hurt. The sensation was unbearable. Yet he had moved. Perhaps only the quarter part of an inch, but he had moved. The woman—Had she seen?

Then he saw the man straighten up, heave his shoulders in a great sigh, and cut off the machine with a finger-flick. The tingling warmth died within his brain, and for an icy moment, he expected to plunge back to semi-comatic nothingness. But, after a giddy scintilla of dizziness, his mind remained strong and intelligent and alive.

Ignoring the blaze of pain that racked his entire being, he tensed himself, pushed, with strangled cries bursting inside his brain at the self-torture, and made himself move another quarter of an inch.

Did they see? Did they? Did they know? Would they free his mind, and leave his body imprisoned to his innermost pleas for release?

No, he thought, giddy with joy. *They . . . They're coming nearer! . . .*

IT'S NO use, Lisa," said Jeff, looking down upon the motionless figure on the stool. "The machine is a flop. Rabbits and lesser creatures, fine, but for the mind of man, no use at all."

"I'm sorry, Jeff," said Lisa, knowing that his calling her by her first name meant that work was done for that day. "Maybe, with some adjustments—"

"Yeah," he grunted bitterly, as two white-jacketed guards led the boy back to his cell, *"maybe!"*

"At least," said Lisa, taking him gently by the arm, "he's no worse off. The experiment just didn't work out, that's all. But there's no harm done, at any rate."

"Nope. I suppose you're right," Jeff said bitterly, reaching to lift the stool from its patch of sunlight. Then, with a brief surge of anger at the futility he felt, he lashed out with his foot and kicked the green parsley-like top clean off a carrot that jutted just a bit higher than its fellows in the garden bed behind the stool. "No harm done," he muttered angrily, and went back with Lisa toward the sanatarium.

While a silent, agony-filled voice behind him kept shrieking, over and over, *"My eyes! He kicked out my eyes! I'm blind! Help me! Help me!"*

THE END

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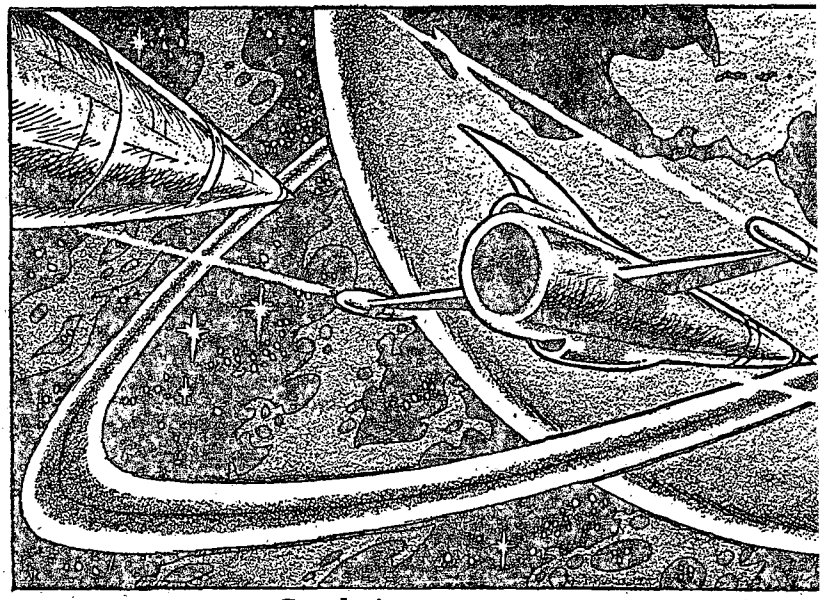

Conclusion

SECOND ENDING

By JAMES WHITE

Illustrator ADKINS

SYNOPSIS

ROSS awoke from a nightmare—or (it was hard to be sure) a series of nightmares—to find himself alone in a hospital bed facing a bust of Beethoven which someone had painted in lifelike color. Beethoven spoke, delivering a lecture on the proper treatment of a patient awakening from Deep Sleep. Ross realized the voice was a recording, but what was the reason for the elaborate joke? And why were there no human beings anywhere around?

Food from self-heating and self-opening cans brought back some of his strength and helped

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stir his memory. The First Atomic War had occurred fifty years before Ross had been born, leaving one person out of ten alive on Earth. Even after the war ended, few children were born, and sterility was at an all-time high. Human life became infinitely precious, and Ross entered training in an "incurables" hospital. He studied Deep Sleep—suspended animation—used to keep patients alive until cures for their diseases could be found. Then, when it was discovered that he had a rare lukeamic condition, he entered Deep Sleep himself. The last thing he remembered clearly was the kindly voice of old Dr. Pellew saying, "Good night, young man, and good luck."

Exploring, the awakened but emaciated and feeble Ross found a folder containing his own case history. He had gone into deep sleep, it reminded him, on 29th September 2017. And the final entry, stamped "Patient Awakened," was dated 7th October 2308. Almost 300 years!

Reading further, Ross learned that early in that period there

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had been an Emergency. Each section of the underground hospital was rendered self-contained and self-sufficient. Techniques had been found for treating patients while they were actually in Deep Sleep, but these took decades to apply, and the doctors themselves couldn't live long enough to finish the task. So the doctors entered Deep Sleep too, leaving one awake at a time to supervise and, when the time came, awaken his successor.

But that didn't explain where everyone was now, or what had caused the nightmares. The following day, Ross ventured deeper into the hospital, and discovered the robots. Sleek, metal-armed cylinders, or egg-shaped bodies with many panels, each mounted on padded wheels, they served as Sisters, cleaners, and other specialties. Communication was difficult until Ross learned to ask them only simple, direct questions. Then he learned the full extent of the tragedy.

"Is Pellow dead?"

"Yes, sir."

"How many, both patients and staff, are left?"

"One, sir. You."

The hospital had become a vast, shining tomb staffed by metal ghouls; and he was buried in it! His first thought was to escape, to get to the surface. Ordering the robots to help him, he fought his way up blocked elevator shafts, through one section after another. In each section it was the same; no other human was left alive. And the surface itself, when he reached it, was even worse. The air was a fog of finely divided ash, the ground was ash and melted rock, and even the sea was black. The world, it seemed, had ended. . . .

Ross, whose physical age was twenty-two, nearly went mad. The robots returned him to bed and tended him until he recovered from the shock and exertion. For days, he had little to do but think. He remembered Alice, the girl he had loved. He wondered if there were anyone else alive, anywhere on the burned-out planet. And he read books and case histories, learning all he could about genetics and robotics. Finally, one day, a robot called him "Sir" instead of "Mr. Ross" again, signifying that he was a human from whom orders should be taken instead of a mere patient, and he buckled down to work.

By careful questioning he learned, finally, the reason for the nightmares. Many patients had died, on being awakened, in their violent struggles against the restraining arms of the robots. When Ross was the last patient of all, the Ward Sister had figured out a way to make his awakening as gentle, as human, as possible. The painted bust had been the best the robots could do.

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When he first heard that, Ross went berserk, and tried to demolish a robot, at the thought of all those wasted lives. Later, he began to understand that the robots had done only what they had been programmed to do in all the other cases. His case had been unique, in that the Ward Sister had used a spark of original, creative thought—theoretically impossible for a robot—to keep him from killing himself in the uncontrollable throes of awakening. . . .

At any rate, if he had to live with the robots, he would make the best possible use of them. There were 372 in the hospital, plus spare parts and repair shops. Their hospital programming was now obsolete and useless. He ordered the robots to modify themselves into searchers. The searchers would seek metal, with which to build more searcher robots. And eventually, the entire planet would be searched, inch by inch. If there was a trace of human life remaining anywhere, Ross would find it. If there wasn't . . .

Ross' research into robotics became more and more intensive. He learned that they could be modified to analyze facts, draw new conclusions, extend their memory banks . . . in brief, think independently, as the Sister who had saved his life had done. Ross knew he could build robot geniuses—and he proceeded to do it.

He also built huge, complex robots miners, to provide ore for metals for still more robots. The task was enormous, and he drove himself until Sister forced him to rest again. And resting, he pondered what would happen if he found no other human life, anywhere on Earth. In that case, he knew, he would have to take a very long-term view. . . .

CHAPTER 9

THE WORLD he knew was either incinerated or almost aseptically clean. On the surface the war had been responsible for the former, and underground the conditions had been due to overzealous Cleaning robots. With the exception of Ross himself there was no organic life inside the hospital, not even on the microscopic level. There were no lab animals, living or dead. Like the corpses of the humans who had died they had been cremated a few hours after death, and his own body wastes were similarly treated. The food containers, which still exploded in his face with irritating frequency, held a synthetic which never had been alive.

Ross had had the idea of finding some warm, tidal pool and filling it with all the scraps and leavings of organic life that he could find in the hope that some-

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time something in that hodge-podge of warring micro-organisms would develop and grow until the evolutionary processes could take over again. He had been thinking in terms of millions of years, naturally, taking the long view.

But the tidal pools were choked with ash and soot, and even if his idea was possible a sudden storm or unusually high tide could wash his experiment back into the sea where the material would become so diluted that no reaction could take place. And the idea was no good anyway because the robots had done a too thorough job of cleaning up.

That was why the First Expedition did not start out until two weeks later—it required that time to re-program the Miner to search for and protect Life and not just human life. The books on plant ecology and horticulture were severely limited in the hospital, but his instructions included the necessity for absorbing any other data on this and related subjects which the expedition might uncover during their search. Small animals if any, insects, plants, weeds or fungus growths—all were to be reported, their positions marked and steps taken for their preservation until they could be moved to the hospital with absolute safety, for them. And finally Ross had given instructions regarding every contingency he could think of and he gave the order to move out.

On four sets of massive caterpillar treads the Miner rumbled through the thirty-foot gap which had been cut in the dome. Ross had been forced to compromise with his original idea for an all-purpose, unspecialized machine, but as he watched his monstrous brainchild go churning past he thought that he had made a good compromise. The powered tread sections were simply a vehicle to transport the Digger-Nurse unit—which was the seat of the robot's not inconsiderable brain—and to house the information-gathering and re-transmitting devices. It literally bristled with antennae, both fixed and rotating, spotlights, camera supports, and deep-level metal detection equipment which gave its outline an indistinct, sketched-in look. Sitting atop this transporter section with its conical drill reflecting red highlights, the Digger-Nurse unit pointed agressively forwards. In operation the digger would lift itself clear of the transporter, stick its blunt nose into the ground and go straight down. Like a hot marble sinking through butter, Ross had thought when he watched the first test run. Outwardly it was a monstrous, terrifying object, which was why Ross had ordered

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it and the four other robots following it to be painted with a large red cross. He didn't want anyone to get the wrong idea about them.

Watching the cavalcade go past—Big Brother trailed by two repair robots and two Sisters modified for long-distance surface travel—Ross thought that a little stirring music would not have been amiss. He strained his eyes to keep them in sight as they rolled and lurched down the hillside, but it had been two days since the last rain and the ash was beginning to blow about again. Ross stopped himself from waving good-bye at them with a distinct effort, then he turned and began walking towards the small control dome.

Here had been installed the equipment which enabled him to see all that the search robots saw, and here it was that Ross spent every waking moment of the next five days. He watched the Miner's radar repeater screens, its forward TV and the less detailed but more penetrating infra-red vision. Every half hour or less he checked that it was still on course, which it always was, and many times he asked if it had found anything even though the repeaters told him that it hadn't. By turns he was bored and frantically impatient, and bad-tempered all the time.

SOME of the things he said and did were petty. He knew it and was ashamed of himself, but that didn't stop him from saying them. But one of the incidents, on the other hand, gave him just cause for losing his temper. The matter of the exploding food containers.

"I am getting fed up with being plastered with this muck every other mealtime!" he had raged, while trying to get rid of the foul-smelling goo which, because of some trace impurities present during its manufacture, had in two hundred years turned into a particularly noisome stink-bomb. "Go through the stores and separate the unspoiled from the rotten, then bring me only the edible stuff from now on. You shouldn't have to be told such a simple thing!"

"Doing what you suggest would mean opening every single can, sir," Sister had replied quietly. "That would cause all the food to spoil within a short time. It is therefore impossible—"

"Is it, now?" Ross had interrupted, the acid in his voice so concentrated that he might have been trying to penetrate the robot's steel casing with it. "I suppose it is impossible to put the unspoiled food in cold storage until I need it, using the Deep Sleep equipment? It would have to be re-heated, of course, but surely your gigantic intellect

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would prove equal to that problem! But there is an even easier way, just shake the things. If they give a bubbling, liquid sound they're bad, and if no sound at all then they are good.

"That rule doesn't hold good in every case, but I don't mind an occasional mess."

As always, Sister had filtered out the profanity, temper and sarcasm and proceeded to deal with the instructional content of the words. She informed him that his instructions had already been relayed to a group of Cleaners who would report when the job was finished. Then she suggested that he look at the main repeater screen, where something appeared to be happening . . .

Four hundred miles to the Northwest it had begun to rain, pushing the visibility out to nearly a mile. The Miner's forward TV brought him a swaying, jerking picture of a narrow valley whose floor was a mixture of muddy ash and large, flat stones which might have once been a highway. Ahead the valley widened to reveal a great, shallow, perfectly circular lake in which black wavelets merged with a rippled glass shoreline in such a way that it was difficult to make out the water's edge. And below the pictured scene a group of winking lights indicated the presence of metal, tremendous quantities of metal.

The find came as a complete surprise to Ross because he had been directing the expedition towards a one-time city some eighty miles to the North. Obviously this had been a military installation which had been constructed after his time, there being no mention of it in the latest maps. The important thing, however, was the metal which had been made available. Stumbling on it like that had been such an incredible piece of good fortune that he couldn't help feeling, illogically perhaps, that more good fortune must follow it.

"Sink a tunnel to a depth of half a mile," Ross directed, trying not to stammer with excitement. "Angle in from a point two hundred yards beyond the water line to avoid the risk of flooding . . ."

THE DIGGER unit unshipped itself, earth and ashes fountained briefly and it began its slow dive underground. Occasionally it altered direction to avoid large masses of metal, not because it could not go through them but merely in order to save time. It reported back continuously to the four-hundred miles distant Ross, both by speech and repeator instruments, and after nearly five hours burrowing the picture of conditions underground was complete.

The installation had been a

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missile launching base, extensive but not very deep. The bomb which had been responsible for the glass-bottomed lake, its force contained and to a great extent directed downwards by the surrounding hills, had smashed its underground galleries flat. There were no survivors, but as the indications were that the base had been fully automated this did not bother Ross very much.

"I've been thinking," he said while the digger unit was returning to the surface. "Our construction program should be based on a site where metal is available rather than go through the time-wasting business of transporting it back here. So I'm going to send you as many repair robots as can be spared, and while they are on the way here is what I want done.

"You have absorbed data on open-cast mining," Ross went on briskly, "and your report states that there are large quantities of metal within fifty feet of the surface. I want you to rejoin your transporter unit as quickly as possible and have your repair robots modify it as a bulldozer. When you have uncovered—"

The Sister broke in at that point. "Mr. Ross," she said firmly, "it's time for bed."

Although Ross protested bitterly as he was led down to his room, underneath he was happier and more hopeful than at any time since his awakening. He was still very far from achieving his goal of searching every square foot of the Earth's surface, but a beginning had been made. He knew the capabilities of his robots, knew that given the raw material—which was now available—he would have a duplicate Miner built by the end of the week, and the week after that he would have half a dozen of them. The square law, he thought, was wonderful. Compared to what he was going to do the achievements of the first few rabbits in Australia would be as nothing.

He went to sleep dreaming happily of the orders he would have to give next day, next week and next year . . .

CHAPTER 10

AS duplicates of the first Miner were completed Ross sent them to investigate the sites of bombed towns and cities in the area, but for Miner One itself he had a special job. The inexplicable feeling of the need for urgency was still with him, as if somewhere, someone who was alive would die if he did not do the right thing quickly. Nevertheless, he sent Number One northwards on a mission which did not include a search for human survivors. Fitted with special equipment and accompanied

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by a Sister with plant biology programming it had been ordered to search the polar areas for plant-life or seeds preserved under the ice. Life could survive intense cold, nobody knew that better than Ross himself.

Then suddenly he discovered who the someone was, the someone who was alive and who would shortly die if he did not think of something quick. It was himself.

"Using the testing procedure you suggested," Sister reported one morning shortly after he awoke, "we have found that approximately two thirds of the remaining food on this level is edible. A random sampling of containers taken from stores on the four higher levels indicates total spoilage. We suspect chemical changes brought about by radiation filtering down from the surface, which did not reach its full effect down here. At the present rate of consumption you have food for eighteen days.

"The matter is urgent, sir," Sister ended, with fine if unconscious understatement. "Have you any instructions?"

"There must be some mistake . . ." began Ross numbly, then went out to have a look for himself. But there was no mistake. Because it had been close to his room he had been supplied with food from the lowest level, he had been using that store for two years, and now it turned out that it was the only one which contained edible food. This was something he should have checked on earlier, and it was now obvious that his subconscious had been trying to remind him of it during sleep. Yet if he had known earlier, what could he have done? Maybe fate had been kind to give him only three weeks notice on the date of his death.

And Sister kept following him everywhere, continually asking for instructions.

"Yes!" said Ross suddenly, as it occurred to him that there was one useful order that he could give. He had been thinking emotionally, playing a distraught, tragic figure and not using his brain at all. He went on, "Signal all Miners and assistant robots to give priority to the search for underground food stores. Except Miner One, it is too far away to get back in time to do any useful work before the deadline . . ."

Deadline, he thought. Ross had a new definition of the word now—the end of a life-line.

". . . And start opening all the cans which you think are spoiled," he ended sharply, "in case your random sampling has missed a few, or a few dozen. Get as many robots onto it as can be packed into the storeroom. Now I've work to do on the surface . . ."

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FOR a long time Ross had used hard physical and mental labor as a means of not thinking about the past. Now he was using it so as not to think about the future. *Psychologically,* he thought mirthlessly, *you are a horrible mess.*

The work involved a project which Ross had shelved temporarily in order to concentrate on the search for survivors, a robot helicopter. Now the possession of such a machine might mean the difference between life and death for him—if the search robots found food and if it could not be brought to him fast enough by land to reach him in time. So he built models and read aeronautical texts and watched his prototype helicopter chew up the hillside with its rotors in vain attempts to throw itself into the air. Then one day it staggered off the ground and circled at an altitude of one hundred feet under a rough semblance of control. Watching from the small dome Ross felt very little satisfaction, because it had taken him thirteen days to achieve this. He had five days left.

The helicopter was still clattering about the sky when one of his Miners reported in. Negatively, as usual.

The problem, according to the robot searcher, was that its metal detection equipment was not sensitive enough to differentiate between food cannisters and the structural wreckage with which they would be associated. The only solution involved sinking test tunnels at intervals and examining the wreckage visually. This was a long, difficult process which held small probability of success, the robot warned, because, in addition to the time involved, none of the city underground shelters had been as deep as the hospital's Fifth level, so that any food which might be found would almost certainly be inedible.

"Things are tough all over," said Ross, and cut the connection viciously. But there was another attention signal blinking at him. He keyed it into the main screen and saw a wavering grey blur which resolved itself into a blizzard immediately the caller identified itself. It was Miner One.

"Sir," it began tonelessly, "data gained after forty-seven test bores leads me to the following deductions. During the war very many nuclear missiles were intercepted and exploded in the polar regions, and several interception bases and stockpiles were situated under the ice. It must have been the most heavily bombed area on the planet. The background radiation is still above normal, though not dangerously so. Analysis of the un-

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derlying soil shows complete sterility."

Ross didn't know what he said to the Miner. All hope had drained out of him and suddenly he was horribly afraid. His world that he had been trying to make live again was dead, the land a crematorium and the ocean a black graveyard, and himself a wriggling blob which had lived a little past its time. And now his time was coming.

He had never considered himself to be the suicidal type, and in the two years since his awakening he had never seriously considered it. But now he wanted to break cleanly with life before he could become any more afraid, something quick like a drop down the elevator shaft or a one-way swim out to sea. At the same time he knew that Sister would not allow anything like that. He knew that he was doomed to a horrible, lingering death from slow starvation, probably with Sister asking for instructions and clicking because she could not supply the one thing he needed, and he felt himself begin to tremble.

"Have you any instructions, sir?" said Sister, over and over.

"No!"

The Sister's voice was not designed to express emotion, but somehow she managed to do so as she said, "Sir, can you discuss the future?"

IN HER emotionless, mechanical fashion Sister was frightened, too, and suddenly Ross remembered one of his early discussions with her. If he died then the robots' reason for being would be gone, it was as simple as that. No wonder they were all asking for instructions, and no wonder Sister had let him work two hours past his bedtime a few nights ago. He didn't know what death involved exactly for a robot, but it was obvious that they were scared stiff. He could feel sorry for them, because he understood how they felt.

Softening his tone, Ross said, "My original instructions regarding the search for survivors will keep you busy for a long time, and those instructions stand. And there is another area of search which I haven't mentioned until now. Space. There was manned space travel for six decades before the war, with a base on the Moon and perhaps on other bodies as well. All of them would have had to be maintained from Earth and could not have supported life indefinitely. But with Deep Sleep techniques . . ."

It's a strong possibility, Ross thought sadly; *If only I could have been around when those robots reported back.*

". . . Anyway," he went on, "I am giving you direct orders to find human survivors. Don't stop

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looking until you do. You will therefore be serving me until you find your new master, so I think that solves your problem."

"Thank you, sir."

"The Moon and Mars are the best bets," Ross said, half to himself. "I know nothing about astronautics, but the search will turn up books on the subject, or uncompleted missiles which you can study. And be careful about the air-pressure, you can operate in a vacuum but humans can't. And when you do find them tell them that I . . . tell them . . ."

It should be a noble, inspiring message, one that would ring gloriously across the centuries. But everything he wanted to say had a whining, frightened note to it, a coward's soliloquy. He shook his head angrily, then repeated Dr. Pellew's last message to himself.

"Tell them it's their problem now, and good luck."

Abruptly Ross whirled and charged out of the dome and along the corridor leading towards the elevators. Striding along he cursed, loudly and viciously and as horribly as he knew how. He cursed to keep from crying and for no other reason, because the thought of Pellew and the brilliant, selfless, utterly splendid men who had preceded him was the greatest tragedy his world had ever known. He thought of Hanson, Pellew, Courtney and the others, of the desperate, unsuccessful experiment with the mutations, and the unending struggle to cure the incurables who were in Deep Sleep—which had been successful. But mostly he thought of those grand old men watching and working alone while all around them the patients and their colleagues slept, taking turns at going into Deep Sleep and running their relay race against time. And all for nothing. It had served merely to extend the life-time of the human race, or more accurately the last member of it, by two miserable years.

CHAPTER 11

WITHOUT remembering how he got there Ross found himself in his room. The bed hadn't been properly made for days and the place was a shambles of scattered books and papers. A few days after his awakening a Cleaner had upset some of his notes and he had forbidden the robots to tidy the place ever since. Making the bed and cleaning up had helped keep his mind occupied, and he had never countermanded the order. He tipped a pile of books off his chair, and in the act of sitting down saw himself in the locker mirror. He dropped the chair and moved closer. It had occurred to him

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that he was looking at the Last Man and he felt a morbid curiosity.

He wasn't much to look at, Ross thought; a skinny body dressed in a ridiculous toga. The face was thin and sensitive, with further proof of that sensitivity —or weakness—apparent in the way the lips quivered and in the dampness around the eyes. It was a young, impressionable, enthusiastic face, the face of a man who was too much of a coward to face reality and too stupid to give up hope. Ross turned away and threw himself onto his unmade bed.

For two years he had tried to avoid thinking of the past because of the awful sense of loneliness and loss it brought, and he had concentrated instead on a bright, distant, rather indistinct future in which he would gradually bring together a nucleus of humanity and set out bravely to repopulate the world. Now he had to face the fact that he was going to die soon, that there was no future, and that the only thing of value left to him was the past. He wanted to remember his pre-awakening period, now—in some strange way he considered it his duty to remember as many places, and events and people as he possibly could.

Gradually his fear had been replaced by a mood of vast solemnity, a sadness so complete and all-embracing that it was almost a pleasure. Now he knew what he had to do with his remaining days of life.

Remember.

FOR the days which followed Ross set a time-table for himself—a loose, unhurried timetable which was subject to change without notice. In the mornings he read, chiefly from books which he had hitherto considered painful or a waste of time. He did not complete the works but dipped briefly into poetry, into brute violence, into sickly-sweet romance. Sometimes he would merely look at the dust-jackets, at the ordinary, studious or pseudo-Bohemian faces who had had three children, or gained a Nobel Prize or been married three times, and who had produced works like *The Body Doesn't Bleed, Alternative Method for Producing the Hannigar Meson Reaction* or *Dawn Song*. He did not try to criticize or evaluate; the good, bad, tragic, sordid and glorious were remembered, and nothing more. In a way Ross was holding a wake, remembering the good and bad points of the deceased, and he had an awful lot of remembering to do.

In the afternoons he would pace the long, shining corridors and go over in his mind what he had read that morning, or he

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would listen to music or lecture tapes—the few remaining which had not become distorted beyond use by the passage of time—or try to hum a piece of music which originally had been scored for full orchestra. Then in the evening he would return to his room and get into philosophical arguments with Sister until the lights went out.

It was then that his hands would begin to shake and he would begin to wonder if he would be able to carry on with this act of quiet resignation to the end, or when his hunger became extreme and he no longer had the strength to read or hold a book would he start crying and begging for the robots to do something, and die blubbering like a baby. He was only twenty-four and he didn't think he could trust himself.

On the fourth day—the last in which he would have full rations—he went onto the surface. It had rained during the night and visibility was fairly good. He found a rock on the hillside facing the sea and sat watching the grimey rollers breaking on a black shore. It was his own life he was remembering now, some ingrained habit of politeness returning people and incidents in their reverse order of importance. His sheltered childhood, the emotional confusion of adolescence, the Hospital with its acid-voiced ogre Dr. Pellew, the parents he was beginning to appreciate only now, and Alice . . .

Suddenly restless, Ross got up from his rock and began climbing the hill again. He walked quickly past the control dome, where the search robots continued to send in their negative reports—no food, no survivors, no life of any kind. When he came to the landward facing slope which had once been the hospital park, he stopped.

An expanse of rich, dark earth streaked with ash in which nothing grew, not because it was incapable of supporting growth but because all growing things were dead. On the day before he was to go into Deep Sleep it had not been like this, however; Ross felt that he could remember every unpruned bush and knee-high blade of grass. The 'park' never had been well tended.

HE HAD been trying to act as though nothing very important was going to happen, as if Deep Sleep was a simple appendectomy. When Alice came off duty he had asked her to go swimming with him, the way he had always done. Ross wanted to have a last swim and to say good-bye to her on the beach. But Alice had insisted that the sea wind was too cold, it was late September, and she wanted to go for a walk instead. She had held

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his hand tightly even before they left the hospital building, and Alice had previously been too shy for such public demonstrations of affection, and they had gone into the park. He had tried to keep the conversation gay and inconsequential for as long as he could, but eventually he had to begin to say good-bye . . .

While the idea of Deep Sleep had frightened Ross it had been nowhere near as strong as a fear of death. He knew that he would awaken someday and so far as he was concerned there would be no interval of time. But he had not realized that to Alice he was going to die tomorrow, going to disappear from the world and from her life. He had not been prepared for this Alice, who clung so fiercely to him that he could hardly breathe, and wet his cheeks with her tears and whose eyes, when they looked into his, held so much love and sheer compassion that . . .

She had been a quiet, thoughtful girl—pleasant, but practical. When Ross qualified they were to be married, but even with him she had maintained a certain reserve. He remembered her telling him laughingly that she preferred to neck on the beach, because there the ocean was handy for him to cool off in.

Standing on that muddy hillside with its eternal smell of damp smoke, Ross knew that Alice was his most precious memory. He thought that at this moment, with the memory of that slow walk back through warm-smelling grass which caught at their feet sharp and clear in his mind, he was prepared to die.

And then suddenly his newly achieved mood of calm and solemn acceptance of his fate was shattered, by that same memory. He began to tremble violently as the realization grew in him that he might, just possibly, not have to die at all. On that September day he had been given more than he knew, he had been given his life.

Oh, Alice . . . he thought.

Behind him Sister was expressing concern over his shivering and making determined efforts to take his temperature. This struck him as being excruciatingly funny and he began to laugh. Sister became even more concerned.

"I'm all right," he said, sobering. In a voice which was still far from steady he gave his orders. All search robots were to be recalled for a special project. He gave minutely detailed instructions regarding it to Sister, and made her repeat them back, because he would not be available himself when they arrived. Finally, immediate preparations must be made to put him into Deep Sleep . . .

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FOUR hours later he was lying in the padded, coffin-like container with the section above his face hinged back to reveal the glittering lenses of Sister staring down at him. The cold had passed the uncomfortable stage and was becoming almost pleasant.

"Now remember," he said for about the fourth time, "if the idea doesn't work out I don't want to be awakened. You'd be wakening me only to let me die of starvation . . ."

"I understand, sir," said Sister. "Have you any other instructions?"

"Yes . . ." began Ross, but lost track of what he said after that. The chill was accelerating through his body and he must have been in a kind of cold delirium. Soon the entire room and its contents would be similarly refrigerated as a precaution against a breakdown of his container, a point which he had forgotten until a few hours ago. He kept seeing the ludicrous picture of three path Sisters dissecting the cuffs of his old tweed trousers. Swim or walk, sea or park, death or life. He wanted Alice.

"I'm sorry, sir."

The flap closed with a gentle click and the cold was like an explosion within him that engulfed his mind in icy darkness. But deep inside him there was a spot of warmth which had no business being there, and a light which grew until it pained his eyes. *Faulty equipment,* he thought disgustedly, *or they've muffed it.* When his vision cleared he glared up at Sister, too angry and disappointed to speak.

"Do not try to move, Mr. Ross," the Sister said sharply. "You are to undergo a half-hour massage, after which you should be able to walk unassisted. Are you ready . . .?"

It might be massage to Sister, Ross thought as he gritted his teeth in agony, but to him it felt like the treatment received in the worst of the old-time concentration camps rather than something of therapuetic value. At the end of the longest half-hour of his life Sister lifted him to a sitting position, and he succeeded in gathering enough breath to speak.

"What happened? Why did you wake me up . . .?"

"Can you stand up, Mr. Ross, and move around?" asked Sister, ignoring him. Ross could, and did. The robot said, "I suggest we go to the surface, sir."

Noting the 'sir,' Ross snarled, "So I'm not your patient anymore, somebody you could order about and beat half to death? Now I'm the boss again, and I want some straight answers. What went wrong, why did you halt the cool-down? Have you

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found an edible food cache . . .?"

"You have been in Deep Sleep," said Sister quietly, "for forty-three thousand years."

The reply left Ross mentally stunned. He was unable to speak much less ask further questions during the trip to the surface, and there he received a greater shock.

CHAPTER 12

THE SUN shone clear and yellow and incandescent out of a pale blue sky, and from his feet a rippling sea of green stretched to the horizon. Five miles away the hills which he had not been able to see since his first Deep Sleep had a misty look, but it was the pale shimmer of a heat haze rather than wind-blown smoke. The air tasted like nothing he had remembered, so clean and fresh and sparkling that he seemed to be drinking rather than breathing it. Ross closed his eyes and with heart pounding madly in his throat turned a half circle, then he opened them.

Pale blue sky and deep blue sea were separated at the horizon by a distant range of white cumulus. The bay was filled with whitecaps and the biggest rollers that Ross had ever seen burst like liquid snow onto a beach that was clean yellow sand for as far as the eye could see.

Suddenly visibility was reduced to nil by a mist in his eyes, although Ross never felt less like crying in all his life.

"It took much longer than you had estimated," the Sister's voice came from behind him, "for the grass grown from your seedlings to make the change from interior cultivation in artificial u/v to surface beds covered by transparent plastic, and even longer before they would grow unprotected on the surface. This was due to finely divided ash in the atmosphere having a masking effect on those sections of the solar spectrum necessary for the growth of plant life. However time and natural mutational changes had produced a strain capable of surviving surface conditions."

Without pausing, Sister went on, "While this strain was developing the ash was gradually being absorbed by the sea and land surface, causing an increase in sunlight. This accelerated the spread of the grass, which in turn hastened the fixing of ash into the soil. And as the grass had no natural enemies or competing life-forms its spread across the planet was, relatively, quite rapid. But it required an additional several millennia for it to evolve, and for us to isolate, edible grains suitable for processing into food.

"This has now been done,"

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Sister concluded, "and your food supply problem is solved."

"Thank you," Ross mumbled. He couldn't take his eyes off the bright yellow sand on the beach. Wind, rain and salt water—mostly the salt water, he thought—had brought about chemical changes which had given the once-grimy this freshly laundered look. All it had needed was a little time.

Forty-three thousand years . . .!

Even the ghosts of the past were dead now, and the proud works of Man, with the exception of this one, robot-tended hospital, were so many smears of rust in the clay. Ross shivered suddenly.

Sister began speaking again, interrupting what was becoming a very unpleasant train of thought.

She said, "Your present physical condition is such that, although you cannot be classified as a patient, an immediate return to full-time duties is to be avoided. I suggest, therefore, that you do not concern yourself with our various progress reports just yet, and instead that you take a vacation . . ."

THERE was a clap of thunder that went on and on. Ross looked around wildly, then up. He saw a tiny silver arrow-head at an unguessable altitude drawing a dazzling white line across the sky. As he watched the vapor trail developed a curve and the ship went into a turn which would have converted any flesh and blood pilot into strawberry jam. It lost speed and altitude rapidly and within minutes was sliding low over the valley and heading out to sea again. The noise made it hard for Ross to think, but it seemed that the ship had slowed to far below its stalling speed. Then a shimmering, heat-distortion along its underside gave him the explanation; vertically mounted jet engines. It came to a halt above the beach and began to sink groundwards. For a moment it was lost in a sandstorm of its own making, then the thunder died and it lay silent and shining—all two hundred feet of it!

He hadn't mentioned vertical take-off models to the robots, Ross told himself excitedly; this was something they must have worked out for themselves, probably with the help of books . . .

"Now that it is possible we thought you might like to travel during your convalescence," Sister resumed, "and the robot which you see on the beach contains accommodation for a human being. If you feel up to it I would suggest—"

Ross laughed. "Let's go!" he shouted, giving Sister a slap on her smooth, unfeeling hide. He

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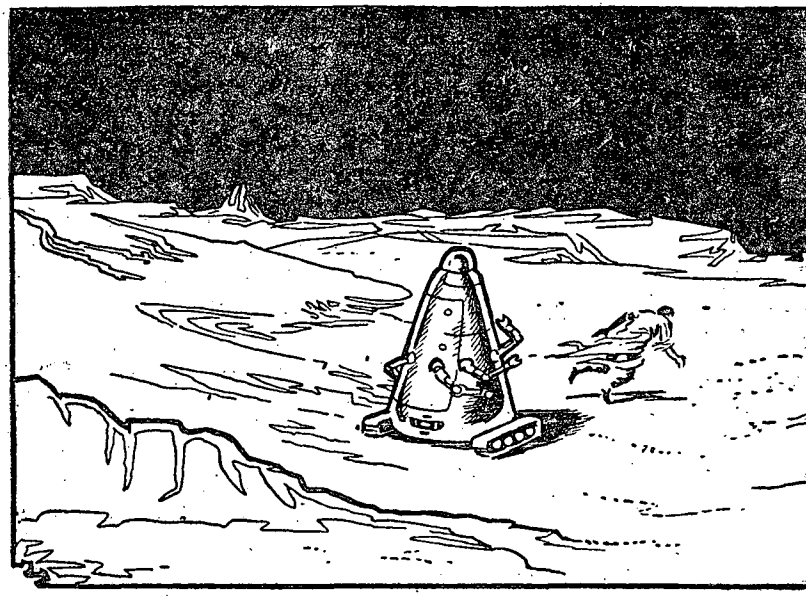

stumbled twice on the way down, but it was sheerest pleasure to fall onto that long, sweet-smelling grass, and the too-hot sand which burned his bare feet was like a sharp ecstasy. Then he was climbing into the cool interior of the ship and looking over the accommodation.

The observation compartment was small, contained a well-padded chair and gave an unobstructed view ahead and below. There was a larger compartment opening off it, containing a bank, toilet facilities and a well-stuffed bookcase. Ross would not have minded betting that the books were all light, noncerebral works.

"You've thought of everything," he said, spontaneously.

"Thank you, sir," said the aircraft, speaking through a grill behind the observation chair. In a pleasant, masculine voice it went on, "I am Searcher A17/3, one of five models designed for long-range reconnaissance and search-coordination duties. On this assignment, however, the maneuvers and accelerations used should cause you the minimum of physical discomfort. Where would you like to go, sir?"

Later, Ross was to remember that day as being the happiest of his life . . .

AT altitudes of ten miles down to a few hundred feet, and

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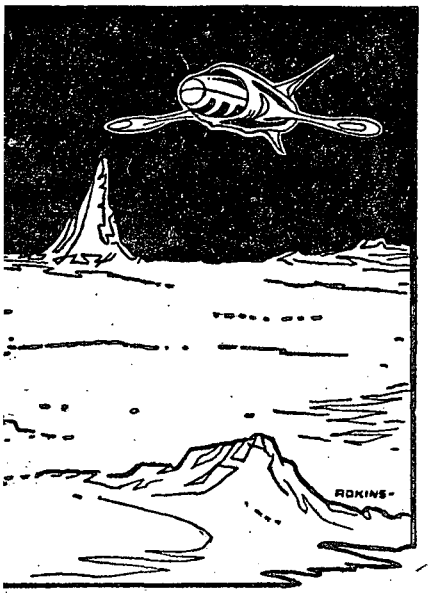

at speeds ranging from zero to Mach Eight, Ross looked at his world—his fresh, green world. He did not think that he was being conceited for regarding it as his own, because he had found it a blackened corpse and he had brought life to it again. For the grass, which had originated from a few tiny seedlings caught in the turnups of his trousers, covered all the land. Ross was happy, excited, stunned by the sheer wonder of it.

In equatorial Africa and around the Amazon Basin the grass was a tangle of lank, vivid green. The old-time grasslands were emerald oceans which stretched, unrelieved by a single tree or bush, to the horizon. Sparse and wiry, the grass struggled to within twenty miles of the Arctic ice, and on the highest mountains it stopped just short of the snow-line. There were seasonal changes of color, of course, and variations due to increasing altitude and latitude, but they were too gradual to be easily apparent. To Ross it looked as though someone had gone over the whole land surface with a paintbrush, coating everything with the same, even shade of green.

Sometimes an inland lake, or a desert, or a snow-capped range of mountains would suddenly break the monotony of land- or sea-scape, and Ross would tell himself smugly that although his world might run heavily to unrelieved blue and green, that was a much nicer color scheme than grey and black.

Late afternoon found him flying above the Caribbean. When he saw the island. It was one of many, a small, flat mound of green ringed by a white halo of surf, and Ross did not know why he picked it in particular. Perhaps it was the tiny bay which gleamed like a yellow horse-shoe on its Western shore which caused him to order the aircraft to land. Certainly he had been feeling like a swim for the past few hours.

Sister raised no objections be-

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yond reminding him that he was not to over-exert himself, that in the time since his last exposure to sunlight the mechanics of stellar evolution had brought about a significant increase in solar radiation, and that in all the world there remained not one usable tube of sun-burn lotion. Nodding soberly, Ross told her that he would bear all these points in mind. Then he wheeled and went charging down the beach and, with a wild yell, dived into a monster wave which was just beginning to curl at the top.

AFTER the swim he moved inland to where the sand gave way to long, hot grass, and lay down to dry off. The sun was very hot, despite its being only an hour before sunset. A great, drowsy happiness filled Ross, and a quiet optimism for the future of his world, his robots and his race. He was too sleepy and contented at the moment to work out details, but considering what he had already accomplished he felt very confident. Sighing, he rolled onto his back, and his fingers unconsciously went through the motions of pulling a long stem of grass and placing it between his teeth. He began to chew.

At that point Sister informed him that the grass he was chewing was not one of the edible strains, but that its use in small quantities would not prove harmful. Ross laughed, then climbed to his feet and headed towards the aircraft. There he made a sizable dent in its food store and a somewhat larger one in its bank. And so ended the happiest day of his life.

ROSS awoke next morning to find the ship airborne and climbing to avoid a hurricane which was sweeping in from the southwest. An hour later, two hundred miles west of Panama, he spotted the vapor trail of another A17 and spoke with it briefly without diverting it from its search duties. He had barely finished speaking when he saw a long, whitish smudge on the surface of the sea close to the horizon. Within minutes it had resolved itself into the most awe-inspiring sight that Ross had ever seen.

Next to his grass, that was.

Spaced out in perfect line abreast at intervals of half a mile, close on one hundred long, low, angular ships battered their way through the long Pacific swell like some gigantic battle-fleet. Five hundred feet long, excessively low in the water, their superstructure covered with a random outgrowth of bumps, girders and angular projects, they were like no ships that history had ever seen. Devoid of such purely human necessities

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as decks, ports and life-boats their bizarre aspect was perhaps explained by the fact that they were ships which sailed rather than ships which were being sailed. Their wakes boiled and spread dazzlingly astern as if each ship was towing a thin white fan, until the sea turned almost to milk before the turbulence died. One hundred ships, identical but for the numerals painted on their bows, all holding a formation which would have sent the most exacting Admiral in history into paroxysms of joy.

"The Pacific search fleet," Sister explained. "They are equipped with every method of underwater detection mentioned in the literature available to us, together with some which seemed to us to be a logical development of that data. They are accompanied, at a depth of five hundred feet, by ten auxiliary vessels capable of making a close investigation of any find down to a depth of one mile. Below that their pressure hulls implode and special equipment is necessary."

"Let's go down for a closer look," said Ross.

For half an hour he flew up and down that tremendous line of ships, communicating with some, but often just staring spellbound at the breathtaking perspective and at the way they seemed to even pitch and roll with the waves in unison. He, Ross, had been responsible for bringing this vast fleet into existence, and the thought made him feel a little drunk. He had a sudden urge to make them re-form into triple line ahead, or concentric circles, or to make them spell out his name across fifty miles of ocean, but conquered it. Then shortly afterwards Sister suggested that they fly southwest, she wanted to show him the interplanetary search project . . .

THAT also was a happy exciting day, but his pleasure was being spoiled by a constant and growing restlessness. He wanted to get back to work and Sister wouldn't let him. If he tried to give instructions to some of the search robots Sister countermanded them, and if he asked for detailed reports on anything she stopped that, also, with the brisk reminder that he was on vacation. Hitherto the robot had treated him in one of two ways—as a patient, when she didn't do anything he told her, or as the Boss who was obeyed implicitly. Now she had seemingly developed a third alternative in which she did some of the things he asked and argued him out of the rest. At first he had suspected a malfunctioning which might have been due to the absence of Sister's data storage trailer—he had thought that she had left

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it behind because of its awkwardness inside the aircraft. But then Sister informed him that she had not had to use the thing for the past ten thousand years, that sub-miniaturization and new data indexing techniques had rendered it obsolete.

And so for two weeks Ross lazed and swam and collected a suntan on all the famous beaches of the world, until Sister indicated that he was fit to resume work by saying, "The search reports are kept at the Hospital, sir. Do you wish to return?"

Again happily, Ross went back to work. Except for short breaks when he swam or went for a walk across the valley, all his time was spent in an enlarged control room which he had ordered built overlooking the sea. Between watching pictures relayed from search-subs on the ocean beds or grey, static-riddled views of the Lunar Alps, he worked at bringing himself up to date.

CHAPTER 13

THE land surfaces of the planet had been searched, thoroughly, to within a few hundred miles of the Poles. One thousand, seven hundred and fifty-eight underground installations had been discovered and examined, which included launching bases, hospitals, underground towns and single residences, and mines converted into Bomb shelters. In the sea seventy-two military or naval establishments had been examined up to the present, but two-thirds of the Pacific and much of the Indian and South Atlantic Oceans had yet to be searched. So far three bases had been discovered on the Moon, but none of them had been able to survive the warheads sent against them.

The search had uncovered vast quantities of usable metal, all of which had been salvaged, and many functioning robots and other servo-mechanisms of the non-thinking type. Millions of books of all kinds, engineering blueprints and various pictorial forms of data had been scanned, absorbed and stored in special memory banks, where they could be reproduced at will. As a result of this his robots had become much more adaptable, and gained tremendously in initiative. Now his most general and loosely-worded instructions, even wishes he had left uncompleted, would be acted upon correctly and as quickly as was possible.

Altogether a tremendous achievement. But on the negative side . . .

No human survivors had been found, no animal life of any kind. Birds that flew, insects that crawled, worms that burrowed; none. The sea, lifeless.

Looking out of his dome Ross

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began to hate the grass which rolled away on three sides of him. Apart from himself it was the only thing which was originally alive on the whole planet, and the only thing which he had gained by his last sleep had been a well-stocked larder.

He took to wandering about the valley and throwing himself down on the grass at a different spot each day. He would lie for hours at a time, staring at the sky and praying just one spider or ear-wig or ladybird would crawl across his arm or leg. He began speaking to the robots less and less, which distressed Sister considerably. She began looking for ways and means of interesting him, and one day she actually succeeded.

"One of the robots we salvaged is a tailor, sir," she said brightly as Ross was about to set out on another aimless walk. "It had occurred to me that you might like something more functional than the bed-linen to wear."

THREE hours later Ross found himself climbing into his first proper clothes in forty thousand years. As he stood before the mirror, resplendent in the tropical whites of a naval Captain, Ross thought that it was just his luck that the robot had been a military tailor. But the whites did set off his tan to advantage. If Alice could have seen him now . . .

"You've made this from bed-sheets, too," said Ross harshly, to break a painful train of thought. "Try dying the stuff. And if you make it with an open collar, don't forget the shirt and tie to go with it, otherwise it would look ridiculous."

"Yes, sir," said the Tailor and Sister in unison. The Tailor moved off and Sister asked, "Is there anything else, sir?"

Ross was silent for a moment, then he said, "I'm fed up, bored. I'd like to go to the Moon."

"I'm sorry, sir," Sister replied, and explained that the accelerations used would be instantly fatal to a human being, that radiation from the vessel's power unit would kill him within a few hours, and that there were other hazards, both radiation and meteoric, which they had no means of guarding him against. For the last human being space-travel was too risky.

"In that case," said Ross carefully, "I think I should go into Deep Sleep again."

"For how long, sir? And what reason?"

Forever, Ross felt like saying, but he knew that if he did Sister would start treating him like a patient again. He had a good reason—or excuse, rather—for wanting to undergo suspended animation again. The idea had come during one of his many despairing hours lying in the

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grass, and the funny thing was that it just might work despite it being only an excuse.

He said: "There is no longer any hope of finding human survivors, in space, under the sea, in or out of Deep Sleep, and it is foolish to pretend that there is. My only purpose must be to bring intelligent organic life back to this planet, and for that we must seed the oceans. Life began in the seas and it may do so again. However, the only organic material available in quantity is the grass, so here is what I want done.

"First chose a strain which flourishes in swampland," he continued quickly, "and gradually increase the depth of water until it grows completely submerged, then gradually replace the fresh water with an increasingly saline solution. Replace soil with sand, and ultimately transplant into shallow sea water. I know that I'm trying to make evolution run backwards, but there is a chance that a strain of sea-grass might adapt into a mobile life-form, and eventually develop intelligence.

"Do you understand your instructions?"

"Yes, sir," said Sister, and added, "The search of the Pacific will be completed in seventy-three years. Would you like to be awakened . . .?"

"You are not to awaken me until the project is a success," said Ross firmly.

And if it wasn't a success, they would never wake him up. At the moment Ross did not care. All at once he was overcome by a horrible depression and a feeling of loneliness so intense that it was like a twisting cramp inside him. He knew that there had been no need for him to rush into Deep Sleep again so quickly, that it might appear to Sister that he was doing it in a fit of pique because she wouldn't allow him a trip into space. The truth was, he admitted to himself, he wanted to escape.

His hopes of finding survivors had been sheer self-delusion, of the same order of probability as discovering a genii who would make his every wish come true. Even worse had been his hope of bringing intelligent life back to his world, of sleeping across the millennia and awakening only for fleeting moments to guide it up the evolutionary ladder until they would stand beside him as equals. That had been hoping on a colossal scale, and he had only now begun to realize that the scale had been more than colossally stupid.

One thing became very clear to him as the robots prepared him for the third time, and that was that he wanted to die in his sleep . . .

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CHAPTER 14

AN HOUR or so later, to him, the robot masseurs were finishing their pummelling of his warming body, and Ross asked the inevitable question. Sister told him twenty-two thousand years.

"Hardly a catnap," said Ross sourly.

He felt cheated. His mood of depression, the horrible, aching loneliness and the awful boredom were with him as strongly as ever. Like his body they had been preserved intact across the millennia. Perhaps something had happened to make him feel better.

"Make your report," he said tiredly. "Or better yet, let me have a look. And *don't* tell me that I'm unfit to receive reports or that I should take a trip. My last vacation, by subjective time, was ten days ago, so just take me to the surface. . . ."

The grass had grown taller and become less flexible—it would no longer be pleasant to lie down in it, Ross thought. His heart was pounding and he felt light-headed, clear indications that the oxygen content of the air had increased. The breakers still crashed in a satisfying manner onto the beach, *but the beach was green!*

There was no sand at all, just a wet tangle of grass which ran unbroken along the shore and straight into the sea. The waves had a strong greenish tint, proving that it extended a considerable distance underwater.

"I couldn't swim in that stuff!" Ross burst out. It didn't matter that Sister was describing the development of a strain which would flourish in sea water, and which repeated uprooting by heavy seas had caused to evolve a limited degree of mobility. The process by which uprooted and washed up sea grass moved back into the sea was a slow one, and only rarely successful, but it could be the beginning of an intelligent plant life-form, Sister affirmed. But Ross could not work up any enthusiasm over the achievement, he kept thinking that the only pleasure left to him had been taken away.

"And you woke me up for this?" said Ross disgustedly. "For a lousy plant which takes three weeks to crawl five yards back to the sea. Cool me again, until something worthwhile happens. Right now."

THE NEXT time he awoke and went up to the surface it was night. The grass stood ten feet high, each stem a half inch thick, and the wind scarcely moved it. On the beach sand again shone whitely, lit by a Moon swollen to three times its normal size. Sister explained that increasingly

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high tides caused by the Moon drawing closer to its primary had forced the sea-grass downwards onto the ocean bed to escape the constant uprooting and several interesting, if minor, mutations had occurred. The sun was now too hot for him to bathe in safety.

Listlessly, Ross received the reports that the search of the Pacific, Luna and Mars had produced negative results. He barely looked at the picture relayed from the sea-bottom showing the latest changes in his grass—to him the mutations seemed very minor, and not interesting at all. And before the bloated, yellow Moon had gone down into the sea he asked Sister to return him to Deep Sleep.

"I advise against it, sir," said Sister.

"But why?" Ross demanded. "There is nothing for me here, and besides, you should be grateful that I want to spend so much time in Deep Sleep. Didn't you tell me once that I am the last human being, and that when I die your reason for existence will be gone? You should be glad of the chance to spin my death out for a few hundred thousand years. Or don't you need me any more?"

Sister was quiet for so long that Ross thought her audio circuits had developed a fault. Finally, she said, "We are still your servants, sir, and always will be. We are also grateful that your life-time has been extended by Deep Sleep, but feel that allowing you to do so indefinitely shows selfishness on our part. In addition to the sound psychological reasons for your reamining awake, we feel that you are entitled to some pleasure, too."

Ross stared at the gleaming, ovoid body with its one fixed and one rotating lens and wondered incredulously what had become of the robot which had clicked irritatingly at him and droned, "I am not programmed to volunteer information." This robot had developed intelligence to the point where she was being troubled by something remarkably like a conscience! She had become so human a personality that Ross had forgotten when he had stopped thinking of her as 'it.' Suddenly he felt ashamed.

It was high time he came to grips with reality. Sister was right, even though the pleasures available were severely limited.

He said: "I suppose there is nothing against me having a midnight swim, providing I'm careful not to stab myself to death with the grass on the way to the beach."

"The water is pleasantly warm, sir," said the robot.

"I could study, start helping you with your problems again. And I could travel."

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"By land, sea, or air, sir."

"Good," said Ross, and stopped. He was beginning to get an idea, a pretty wild and at the same time a very childish idea. As it grew he had to tell himself several times that he was The Boss, that the world and everything in it was his, to do with as he liked. He grinned suddenly, thinking of the vast army of robots at his command —something like two million, according to Sister's latest figures. A large proportion of them were immobile, or would be unable to participate for various reasons, but even so he thought that it promised to be quite an affair. Excitedly he began detailing his requirements.

SISTER listened, made no objections, and informed him that what he proposed would require approximately three weeks. Ross replied that he would spend the time swimming, studying and consulting with the tailor. Then he returned to his room to sleep, as happy as a boy with a new set of toy soldiers.

But when the great day dawned Ross had plunged from excited anticipation to a new low in despair. During the past three weeks he had tried study, tried to produce some original thoughts on his present situation and future hopes, only to find that all books had deteriorated into uselessness and their contents recorded in the brains of robots. The robots were in possession of full and accurate data on all subjects from astronomy to zoology, and the ability to make use of it in such a way that it made Ross's slow, human methods of reasoning seem moronic by comparison. Time and again he had started arguments with them on such obtuse subjects as genetics, the continuous creation theory and moral philosophy, only to be confounded every time. It was no comfort for him to discover that he was not arguing with one robot but hundreds, all storing their share of data and making it instantly available to each other.

The mechanics of that communications and indexing system had interested him, until one of the robots tried to explain it and he understood about one word in ten.

His robots were far smarter than he was. Ross felt stupid and useless, like an idiot child. And he did not care now whether he played with his toys or not. But they had been gathering for days, overlaying the green of the surrounding hills and valleys with the shining grey of their bodies, sliding like long metal ghosts into the bay to drop anchor, and scoring thunderous white lines across the sky before landing on the plateau to the

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north, and he felt that he had certain obligations towards them. So he dressed himself in the navy blue uniform, which was styled after that of an Army Major-General and bore the wings and insignia of an Air Marshall, and swung over his shoulders an ankle length cape which was lined in red and trimmed with gold. Then he went up to his control dome and gave the signal for the Review to commence.

Immediately the land robots lurched into motion, forming themselves into a column that was easily a quarter of a mile wide and which rolled towards him along the valley floor and passed within a hundred feet of the dome before disappearing around the shoulder of the hill. They poured by like an endless metal river, types which he recognized as descendants of the original Miners, but many others which he had to ask Sister about. The long, tree-hard grass was flattened and churned into the earth by the passage of the first wave, and before an hour had passed the column had gouged a quarter mile furrow along the valley which was in places twenty feet deep. Ross turned to look out over the bay.

OBVIOUSLY his ships had had access to considerable data on naval maneuvers. In rigid, closely-spaced flotilla down to single units they charged back and forth across the bay, weaving to avoid other ships engaged in equally complex operations, and throwing up a dramatic white bow-wave which fluttered like a battle ensign. Ross was stirred in spite of himself. The bay was a blue slate thirty miles across, literally covered with the white scrawls and squiggles left by the hurrying ships. His eyes were caught by a robot that was almost the size of an old-time battleship which had dropped two search-subs and launched an aircraft while tearing shorewards at full speed. At the last possible moment it went slicing into a U-turn which threw a dazzling scimitar of foam astern and went charging out to see again. Then a multiple sonic crash pulled his attention skywards.

In perfect echelon formation five descendants of the A17 Searchers roared low over the valley and pulled into a vertical climb that made the two-hundred foot arrow-heads shrink to dots within seconds, then they curved over into a loop and came screaming down again. They levelled out over the sea, re-formed and went thundering past the control dome in rigid line abreast.

Ross saluted.

Immediately he felt his face burning with shame and anger. He had been thinking and act-

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ing in the most childish way imaginable; play-acting, dressing up in theatrical uniforms and treating the robots as if they were his toys. And the toys had cooperated to the extent that they had made him salute them! Were the damn things trying to get a rise out of him, or something . . .?

"Do it again," snarled Ross. "And this time close up, there's about half a mile between you!"

"Not quite as much as that," Sister objected. "But at the velocities involved it is safer to—"

"I have seen human jet pilots," said Ross scathingly, "who flew wingtip to wingtip . . ."

Effortlessly the formation climbed, though not quite wingtip to wing-tip, rolled into their loop and levelled out, and suddenly there were only three of them and a formless tangle of wreckage which fell across the sky to crash three miles inland.

"Wh-what happened?" said Ross foolishly.

Sister was silent for nearly a minute, and Ross thought he knew what was going on in her complex, mechanical mind. Then she told him simply that two robots of the higher intelligence levels had been irreparably damaged, that their metal was salvageable but the personalities concerned had been permanently deactivated. She also suggested that he go below at once, as the robots had possessed nuclear power plants and there was a danger of radioactive contamination.

"I'm sorry," said Ross, "truly I am."

ON the way down to his room he had time to think about a lot of things, but chiefly of the complete hopelessness of his position and his pathological refusal to accept the reality which had faced him on his first awakening. He was the last man and he should have accepted that fact and allowed himself to die of starvation when he had the chance. Instead he had instituted a search for survivors which was doomed from the start, then he had tried to re-create intelligent life and produced only grass. The race of Man was finished, written off, and he was simply a last loose end dangling across Time.

Maybe he wallowed a little in self-pity, but not much nor for very long. He did some positive thinking as well.

Over the years the robots had developed intelligence and initiative to an extent which would have been frightening if Ross had not known that they were his servants and protectors. Their basic drives, he now knew, were the need to serve Man, the urge to acquire data and experience in order to serve Man more effi-

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ciently, and the purely selfish urge to improve their own mental and physical equipment. If, however, they could be made to serve themselves rather than Man, what then? The answer was a race of intelligent beings who would be immensely long-lived and virtually indestructible, in short a super-race who would take over where Man had left off.

There was *nothing* that the robots couldn't do, if they would only stop thinking like slaves.

When they reached his room Ross sat on the edge of the bed and began repeating his thoughts to Sister, and the conclusions he had come to regarding them. He used very simple words, as though he was talking to the old, childish Sister of his first awakening, because he wanted to make absolutely sure that the robot—that *all* the robots—understood him. As he spoke a feeling of ineffable sadness overcame him and strangely, a fierce pride. This was a moment of tragedy and greatness, of Ending and Rebirth, and Ross was suddenly afraid that he was going to ham it up.

Awkwardly, he concluded, ". . . And so you can regard me as a friend, if you like, or a partner." He smiled bleakly. "A sleeping partner. But that is all. From now on I have no right to command you. I have set you free."

For several seconds the robot did not say anything, and Ross never did know whether his noble act of self-sacrifice was refused, ignored as the ravings of a sick mind, or what. Then Sister spoke.

"We have prepared a little present for you, sir," she said, "but bearing in mind your remarks some time ago on the subject of kindness as opposed to assistance, I have been undecided as to whether or not I should give it to you. I hope you like it, sir."

It was large picture, life size and in color, of the head and shoulders of Alice. Obviously an enlargement of the photograph he had kept in his wallet. The flesh tints were off slightly, her glorious dark tan had a faintly greenish sheen, but otherwise the picture looked so natural and alive that he wanted to cry, or curse.

"It's perfect," he said. "Thank you."

"You always call for her during your last moments of consciousness prior to Deep Sleep," Sister went on, "and even though the wish is expressed while your mind is incapable of working logically, we must do everything possible to try to fulfill it. At the moment, this was the best we could do."

Ross stood the picture against the bust of Beethoven and looked at it for a long time. Finally, he

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turned to Sister and said, "I want to go to sleep."

They both knew that he wasn't talking about bed.

CHAPTER 15

WHILE he slept his world of grass absorbed carbon and CO_2 from the soil and air, synthesizing oxygen. Over the centuries the oxygen content of the atmosphere increased, doubled. It was inevitable that a long dry spell would occur, broken by a sudden thunderstorm. A flash of lightning stabbed earthwards, igniting the grass which now grew in spines twenty feet high. Within minutes there raged a conflagration covering several acres, which hurled towering fountains of sparks into the sky and spread with the speed of the wind. For in that oxygen-rich air even the damp material caught and the sparks never went out. A tidal wave of fire swept across the continental land masses, slowed but never stopped by rainstorms, adverse winds or mountain ranges. A few islands in mid Pacific escaped, but all the others caught the air-borne contagion and became their own funeral pyre.

Ross awoke to a scene which made him think that Time had gone full circle; sooty ground, smoke and a baleful, red-ringed Sun. Before he could say anything Sister explained what had happened, then went on to assure him that the amount of carbon released into the atmosphere had restored the oxygen content to normal and that the combustion products currently fouling the air would, as they had done once before, disappear with time. Her reason for awakening him was to report on the progress of the sea-grass.

Violent tides pulled up by the approaching Moon, she began had forced the grass to seek the more sheltered environment of the ocean bed. Here, under extreme pressure, darkness and a gradually rising temperature had brought about a significant mutation. In order to keep alive in those conditions the plants had to absorb large quantities of necessary minerals from the sea bed, and at the same time, because they had to retain their defensive mobility, their roots had to be shallow. The result was that they had to keep on the move.

Recently these mobile plants had begun to band together. There were now several hundred colonies of them crawling like vast, moving carpets across the ocean floor, grazing for minerals and the non-mobile strains of their own species.

"Leave them for a couple of million years," said Ross, sighing, "and see what happens." He

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turned to go below again. He agreed that it was a most significant mutation, the most promising yet, but his capacity for hope had gone.

Sister moved quickly in front of him. She said, "I would prefer you to remain awake, sir."

The wording and accompanying action made it seem more an order than a request. Ross felt anger stir within him, then die again. He said, "Why?"

"For psychological reasons, sir," the robot replied, respectfully enough. "You should remain awake for one month at least, so that you can appreciate and understand what has happened during the preceding period of suspended animation. Major changes are occurring and you are giving yourself no time to adjust to them. You must interest yourself in things again. We . . . we fear for your sanity, sir."

Ross was silent. In the present circumstances, he thought, sanity was a distinct disadvantage.

"We could hold another Review, sir," Sister went on. "There are not as many robots available as there were last time, but then the visibility is not so good, either. We were thinking that we might stage a mock battle for you. The casualties would have to be pretended, of course, because we may not willfully damage or destroy ourselves unless in the defense of a human being, but we have absorbed many books on the subject of war and are confident that we could put on a show which would amuse you, sir."

Ross shook his head.

"There are ways in which you could assist us . . ." began Sister, and then for the first time in countless thousands of years she began to tick!

"How?" said Ross, interested at last.

OUTSIDE a sudden rain-squall left the ground steaming and the sky reasonable clear. Above the sea a vast, fuzzy crescent shone through the smoke haze. The Sun was a formless white glare on the western horizon, so this must be the Moon. Ross felt a tiny surge of hope at the sight, but it was the sad, negative sort of hope, the hope of escape.

He had missed Sister's opening remarks, and brought his mind back to present time to hear her saying, ". . . your instructions give us very little to occupy our time, and even a robot can become bored when forced simply to observe minute changes which require thousands of years to become manifest. For this reason we have, with the enormous store of data at our disposal, sought methods of re-evaluating and extending our knowl-

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edge of the sciences. With the physical sciences we have made considerable progress . . ."

She began to tick again in the way which used to be indicative of a major dilemma. This was something about which she must feel very strongly.

". . . But in the social, and related sciences we have encountered problems on which we need human guidance," she finished with a rush.

"Such as?" said Ross.

"An example," said Sister. "Is it allowable to force human beings into an advanced state of civilization rapidly, by means of periodic wars, supposing that there are very good, but not vital, reasons for wanting their advance to be rapid."

You have been getting in deep water, Ross thought, surprised and more than a little awed. Aloud, he said, "Speaking from experience I'd say that it is not allowable under any circumstances. Your hypothetical human beings should advance slowly and naturally, so that physical knowledge should not outstrip the psychological, if they are to survive to enjoy their advances . . ."

He stopped, a growing suspicion beginning to form in his mind, then he added, "I know this is a hypothetical problem, but are the robots by any chance planning on fighting a war among themselves to increase their—"

"No, sir," said Sister.

But the suspicion would not leave him. He was remembering a discussion he had had with Sister a long time ago, about kindness, and lying, and puns. Certainly she had never made anything remotely resembling a pun, but she had done a few things which were meant to be kind. Maybe . . .

"Are you telling the truth?" he asked sharply.

"Yes, sir," said Sister again.

"If you are, that's what you would say," Ross said thoughtfully, "And if you are lying that is still what you would say." His voice became suddenly harsh. "But remember this. I want no wars, no matter how good the reasons appear for having them. That is an order!"

"I understand, sir."

"And to keep your busy little minds out of mischief," he went on more quietly, "I have a job for you. It will require considerable time and effort, but when built will give me much more pleasure than any Review or war games . . ."

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan . . .

ROSS envisaged a palace to end all palaces, a slender shining tower a mile high possessing the internal capacity of a large city.

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The structural material would be transparent allowing an unimpeded view in all directions while at the same time blocking off the heat and glare from the Sun. Architecturally it would be simple and aesthetically pleasing, as a whole and in its internal sub-divisions, which should blend with and at the same time accentuate their contents. Furnishing his palace might be an even longer job than building it, because he wanted it to house reconstructions of all the famous sculptures, paintings, tapestries and art treasures of the world. And at the earliest possible moment he wanted to be moved into the new structure. He was growing tired of always waking in his underground room, and when the new building was complete he wanted the old Hospital closed up.

"Only the works which have been illustrated or adequately described in material found by the original search robots can be reproduced," Sister said when he had finished speaking, "paintings relatively easily and the three-dimensional works with more difficulty. Much original research in structural methods will be necessary, and as we lack the intuitive reasoning processes of human beings the project will take a long time."

"I've got plenty of that," said Ross easily. The lie would have fooled a human, he thought, much less a robot.

He remained awake for three weeks on that occasion, watching from the control dome the colonies of pale green sea grass undulating along the ocean bed, and extending his requirements regarding the size and contents of the Palace. Possibly he sounded a little on the megalomaniac side to Sister, but he hoped that she would not realize that all the amendments were designed solely to extend the time necessary to complete the project. For the truth was that he did not care at all about art treasures or a splendid crystal tower which soared a mile into the sky. All he wanted was that his frozen, sleeping body be transferred from its safe subterranean crypt to somewhere more . . . vulnerable.

When he returned to Deep Sleep it was with the memory of a gigantic crescent Moon and the hope that Sister and the others would not miss him too much when he was gone.

CHAPTER 16

TIME passed.

Ninety-seven million miles away the Sun grew old and small and hot. On Earth the ice-caps finally disappeared, the seas never cooled and, with the rise in temperature, the molecular motion of gases saw to it that the

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planetary atmosphere leaked slowly into space. The Moon continued to spiral in, pulling up tides which forced the sea-grass even deeper into the ocean and caused many more significant mutations to occur, until it entered Roche's Limit and broke up. What the war had done to the planet was like a pin-prick to what happened then.

Not all of the Moon fell on Earth, only enough to raise the sea-level by three hundred feet and open a few large cracks in the crust from which lava and super-heated steam poured for many hundreds of years, and changed the planetary surface out of all recognition. Most of it remained in orbit, grinding itself into smaller and smaller pieces until Earth had a ring-system to rival Saturn's.

Ross awoke to find the base of his tower one hundred feet below sea-level, the local topography unrecognizable, and a night that was as bright as day. The rings blazed across the sky, dimming all but the brightest stars, a celestial triumphal arch. Every wave in the sea threw back a reflection which made it seem that his tower rose out of an ocean of rippling silver. And joining the blazing sky with the dazzling sea were the thin white tendrils of the shooting stars.

"How did the palace escape?" asked Ross bitterly.

He found himself lost after the first three words of the explanation, but the answer seemed to be some kind of force-field, or repulsion field. ". . . And I regret to say, sir," Sister ended, "that the sea-grass was unable to survive the catastrophe."

"Too bad," said Ross.

There was a long silence, then Sister suggested showing him around. It was mianly in order to please the robots who had built it rather than from curiosity that he agreed. He felt terrible.

Every synonym for magnificent, opulent and awe-inspiring could have been used to describe the palace in which he now lived. It was vast, but comfortable; grandiose, but in perfect taste. *Like a museum with fitted carpets,* thought Ross ironically. But he was tremendously impressed, so much so that he did not mention to Sister the one minor, but maddeningly constant, error. In all the otherwise perfect reproductions of great paintings, regardless of how the original Old Masters had painted them, the faces and bodies had been given a deep, rich tan coloring with a background hint of green.

It was exactly the shade they had used in the blowup of Alice's picture, and he remembered telling Sister that it had been perfect. Which was probably the reason that they had given every-

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one the same complexion. After the first few days, however, he became accustomed to it.

Strangely, Sister made no objection when he asked to Deep Sleep.

THE centuries passed like single cards in a riffled deck. He awoke to a sea which steamed all night and boiled all day. The air was a white, superheated fog from which there fell a constant, scalding rain. Altogether it was a monotonous, depressing sight and after the first day Ross stopped looking at it. Instead he wandered the vast halls and corridors, over floors so smooth and mirror-polished that there were times when he felt he would fall through them onto the ceiling, or across carpets so thick in the pile that it was like walking in long grass, like a silent and resplendent ghost. He rarely spoke, and when he did it was more often to the tailor than to Sister. His thoughts and mood were reflected in his dress.

There was the black uniform, severely cut and edged with the bare minimum of silver braid, and the long, ankle-length cloak with its single silver clasp at the throat which went with it; that was the uniform of brooding tragedy. Then there was the white uniform that was heaped with gold braid, decorations and a Noble Order represented by the scarlet ribbon which made a broad, diagonal slash across the chest. A cloak of ermine and purple went with that one, and a crown. That was the dress of a man who, literally, owned the world. And then there was the shapeless white jacket and trousers which had been the uniform of a working doctor . . .

Sister did not like him wearing that uniform, neither did she approve of his requests that some of the robots should be given human shape, using plastic foam on a humanoid form. Such activities were psychologically undesirable, she said. And it was Sister who, on the eighteenth day since his latest awakening, suggested that he go into Deep Sleep again.

He wondered about that and, because no subjective time at all elapsed during suspended animation, he was still wondering about it when he was revived.

CHAPTER 17

THE Sun had become an aged, malignant dwarf whose glare had left Earth a dessicated corpse. The seas had long since boiled away into space and with them had gone the air. The atmosphere which remained was too rarified to check the meteorites which still fell from the Rings. The sky was black; all else—the Sun, the Rings, the

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cracked, dusty earth—was a searing, blinding white. A high-pitched humming sound pervaded every room and corridor in the palace, and he was informed that was produced by mechanism laboring to keep the internal temperature at a level comfortable to its human occupant, and that the noise was unavoidable. An even more disquieting occurrence was that Sister no longer accompanied him wherever he went.

The reason given was that she had other duties to perform.

Three days later while wandering about on the lower levels he found her stopped outside the door to one of the sub power rooms. She was not simply in a state of Low Alert, she seemed completely lifeless. Nothing that Ross could do, from shouting to beating on her shiny casing with hands and feet, elicited a response. For the first time the realization came that she—*it*—was only an involved piece of machinery rather than a near-human servant and friend. It made him feel suddenly afraid, and lonelier than ever.

He thought regretfully, *I have been wasting Time . . .*

The two years spent in the blackened, smoking world, when he had worked, studied and initiated the first robot search for surviving life, had been happy and at the same time something of which he could feel proud. Even happier had been his second awakening to the fresh, green world he had brought into being, with that world-girdling vacation with Sister and the A17. But within a few days he had given in to despair and talked Sister into putting him to sleep again. Since then his life had been a series of disjointed episodes in a violently changing world. To him only a few days had passed since the two robot aircraft had crashed —he was still sorry about that —and the seas had started to boil. Why, his body still retained the tan from the vacation!

Recently — *recently?* — Sister had deliberately avoided giving him the exact figures, but he knew that countless millions of years had passed while he aged a few weeks. At the present rate the very universe could live and die, and he would still be in his early twenties, still living and still wanting to sleep farther into the future, while around him stretched eternal blackness and the cold, lifeless cinders of the stars.

He should have faced up to reality millions of years ago, when his sea-grass was crawling about the ocean bed and exhibiting the first stirrings of intelligence, and he should have lived out his life then. Probably he would not have accomplished

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anything, but at least he would have tried. Just as Pellew, Courtland and the others had tried. He thought again of those great old men who had taken it in turns to stand solitary watch over the Hospital's dwindling Deep Sleepers. They had faced loneliness and despair also, and at times they must have reached the brink of madness, but they had not stopped trying until they had stopped living. He had thrown their lives away along with his own.

THE VAST robot potential he had wasted by assigning impossible tasks, simply from a cowardly desire to die in his sleep. He should have considered the interplanetary angle more fully, tried to transplant Martian or Venusian life-forms into a sterile Earth. The result might have been nightmarish, but it would have been life. He was sure that Pellew would have understood and forgiven him if it hadn't been human life. There were a lot of things he could have, and should have, tried.

Ross bent forward and slowly put his hand on her smooth metal casing and looked at the glinting, emotionless lenses, neither of which moved. Sister had always looked emotionless, and he shouldn't get so worked up over an outside metal egg which had finally broken down.

"I'm sorry," he said, and turned to look for another robot who would be able to put him into Deep Sleep again. There seemed to be very few robots about, these days . . .

HE AWOKE with the conviction that he was dreaming that he was awakening, because Sister was bending over him. "But you're dead," he burst out.

"No, sir," Sister replied, "I was reparable."

"I'm very glad to hear it," said Ross warmly. "And Sister, this time I'm going to stay awake no matter what. I . . . I would like to die of old age, among friends—"

"I'm sorry, sir," the robot broke in. "You have been revived only that we may move you to safer quarters. The refrigeration units over most of the tower have failed, and only a few sections are inhabitable over long periods. You will be much safer in Deep Sleep."

"But I don't want—"

"Are you able to walk, sir?"

There followed a hundred yard walk which developed quickly into a hobbling run as the plastic flooring burned his feet and a blast furnace wind scorched his skin and sent the tears boiling down his cheeks. He caught glimpses of charred furniture and cracked or melted statuary, but he didn't see out-

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side. Which was probably a good thing. The run ended in a narrow, circular tunnel which terminated in a tiny compartment containing little more than a Deep Sleep casket. The heavy, airtight door swung shut behind them.

"Turn around slowly, sir," said Sister, aiming a gadget at him which emitted a fine odorless spray. "This should help you later . . ."

"It's staining my skin green . . ." began Ross, then snapped, "But I want to stay awake!"

Sister went through the motions of assisting him into the Deep Sleep casket. In actual fact she forced him into it and held him while a sedative shot she had administered took effect. "Wait! Please . . . !" he begged. He thought he knew what was happening and he felt horribly afraid.

Selfishly the robots were going to keep him alive as long as they could. When outside conditions made it impossible to keep this tiny compartment refrigerated, they would refrigerate only the casket. He would go on living in Deep Sleep until the last robot died. Then the cooling unit would fail and he would awake for the last time, briefly, in a casket which was fast becoming red hot . . .

But there was something wrong about the whole situation.

"Why did you wake me?" he asked thickly. "Why didn't you move me without waking me up? And you gave me a shot. There haven't been any medical supplies since . . ."

"I wanted to say good-bye, sir," said the robot, "and good luck."

CHAPTER 18

WHEN the human Ross was safely in Deep Sleep, Sister spoke again. It used a language which was flexible, concise, yet highly compressed—the language which had been developed by intelligent, self-willed robots over two hundred million years and which travelled, not through air or ether, but by a medium which brought it to the other side of the Galaxy at the speed of thought.

"Sister 5B", it said. "Mr. Ross is in Deep Sleep. Latest observations corroborate our predictions that the Sun will shortly enter a period of instability. The detonation will be of sub-Nova proportions and will precede its entry into the cooler Red Dwarf stage, but in the process all space out to the orbit of Saturn will become uninhabitable for Human or Robot life. Is Fomalhaut IV ready?"

"Anthropologist 885/AS/931," replied another voice. "It is ready, 5B. But you realize that

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the closer the natives approach our Master's requirements the more difficult it has been to control them. I keep wanting to call them "Sir." And his definite wish that war not be used to accelerate the rise of civilization here has delayed matters, although it has produced a culture which is infinitely more stable than that possessed by Earth . . ."

"Geneticist 44/RLB/778," broke in another voice. "I do not agree with this philosophical hair-splitting! At a time when earth still retained her oceans we found a planet at the stage where saurian life was being replaced by mammalian, and we controlled and guided the evolution of these mammals until we have reached the point where they duplicate the original human life-form so closely that interbreeding is possible. When does a perfect duplicate become the real thing?"

"Sister 5B," returned the original speaker. "It was hair-splitting such as this which allowed us to evolve intelligence, plus the general instructions issued to us by the Master. First we convinced ourselves that a motionless, unthinking and unliving human being in Deep Sleep was alive, when all logic contradicted this. Then we took his instructions to find, aid and protect all forms of life, in conjunction with his wishes expressed during cold delirium regarding the female human Alice, and twisted them to our own selfish purposes . . ."

THEY had been told to search and when Earth and the nearer planets proved empty of human survivors they had continued outwards to the planets which circled other suns, all the time concealing that fact. Ross had once discussed Lying and Kindness with Sister, and the robots had tried very hard to understand and practice those concepts. They had had an unfortunate tendency to tick when a direct lie was called for, but otherwise they had managed very well. When a sub-space drive was developed with the aid of pre-war Earth mathematics, they had concealed that also, just as they kept quiet when their metal bodies became obsolete and they evolved into beings of pure force. A few of them had to energize the old-style bodies for Ross's benefit, and once Ross had found Sister's body while it was vacant . . .

". . . But now we are about to carry out his wishes and keep ourselves alive into the indefinite future as well. When he comes to the planet and race we have prepared for him, his life will end a little more than a half-century hence. But we will

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not die because his descendants will be partly human, and we are very good at splitting heirs."

"Geneticist 44/RL/778. With all respect, the Master should not have told you about puns, 5B."

"So we will continue to search," Sister 5B went on, "safe in the knowledge that our Master is immortal. We will gather data, we will aid or guide life-forms which we encounter, or ignore them if this appears to be the kinder thing to do, and we will expand throughout all the Galaxies until the end of Space is reached . . ."

"Astronomer 226/V/73," broke in a new voice. It was polite as befitted one who is addressing the being who had spent practically all its life close to the Master, yet at the same time it was tinged with impatience at these older robots who insisted on repeating things everyone knew already. It said; "If it transpires that the space-time continuum has positive rather than negative curvature and we return to this galaxy, our starting point, what then, 5B?"

"We will say," 5B replied quietly, "Mission accomplished, sir. Have you any further instructions?"

* * *

ROSS awoke and, as he had done three years and an eternity ago, began to exercise painfully by crawling about on the floor. The air smelled fresh and cool and there was no sign of Sister or anyone else. He ate, exercised and ate again. Almost by accident he discovered the sliding door which opened into a compartment which contained a large circular picture of the branch of a tree. There was a startling illusion of depth to the picture, and when he moved closer to examine the odd, feathery leaves he discovered that it wasn't a picture at all.

He left the tiny ship and stumbled through a carpet of grass patterned by weeds and bushes which had never grown on Earth. He breathed deeply, through his nose so as to hold the scent of growing things for as long as possible, and his pulse hammered so loudly in his ears that he thought that he might prove once and for all if it was possible to die from sheer joy. It was only slowly that sounds began to register; leaves rustling, insect noises, the swish of passing cars and the thump of waves on a beach. Five minutes took him to the edge of the sea.

There was nothing strange about the sand or the sky or the waves, except that he had never expected to see such things again. But the group of people lying on the beach were alien. It was a subtle alien-ness which, Ross now realized, he had been

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prepared for by the reproductions in his palace—an underlying greenish tinge to their otherwise normal skin coloring. And even at this distance he could see that the people sprawling on their brightly colored bath-towels might all have been close relatives of Alice . . .

The implications were too vast for him to grasp all at once. He swallowed a couple of times, then said simply, "Thank you, Sister."

A silent, invisible globe of force which hovered protectively above his head bobbed once in acknowledgement. Sister had evaluated the situation and had long ago decided that allowing the Master to think that all the robots had died would be the kindest thing to do.

Ross walked slowly towards the bathers, knowing somehow that he had nothing to fear. There might be language difficulties at first, misunderstandings, even unpleasantness, but they did not look the sort of people who would hurt anyone simply for being a stranger. They didn't seem . . . warlike.

They were different, of course, but not much. You wouldn't mind if your sister married one of them.

Come to think of it, he thought, you wouldn't mind marrying one yourself.

THE END

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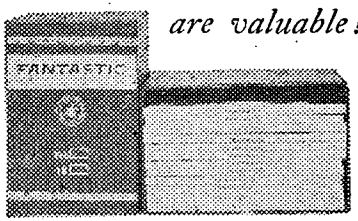

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the GOGGLES of

By FRITZ LEIBER

To those who wear the goggles of Dr. Dragonet there is another world— of mystery, joy and, yes, terror . . .

HAVE you ever thought what it would be like if we could see *minds?*" Dr. Hugo Dragonet asked.

"You've got something will do *that?*" I demanded.

Dr. Hugo Dragonet indicated the four pairs of black goggles scattered across the center of the gleaming gray table and sat back grinning at us like a genial old condor.

Marty, Alice and I eyed them suspiciously. The last time we had ventured to wear a gadget of the Doctor's—an innocuous-seeming sort of hearing aid—it had been to hear a nervous jungle murmur which the Doctor had asserted was the sounds of the subconscious mind. Just a jungle murmur, a little like the background music for a darkest Africa movie, but after five minutes of it Alice had become hysterical, Marty had growled out a senseless accusation of murder against me, and I had had a terrifyingly vivid vision of the great

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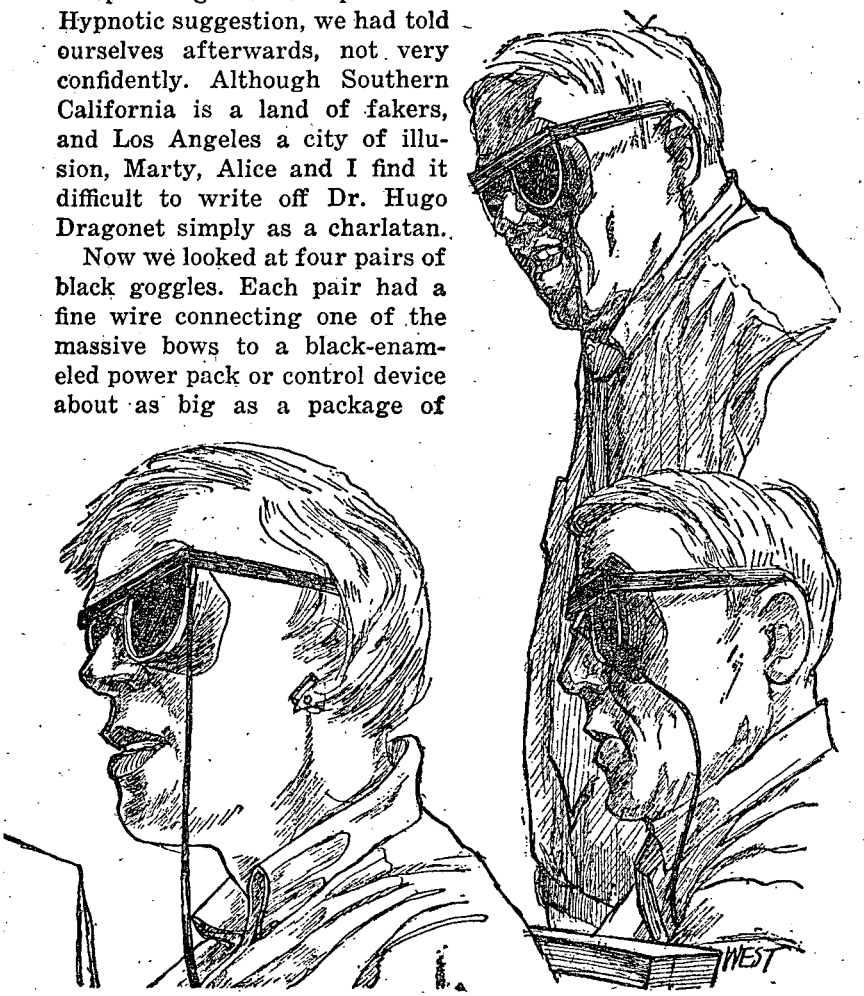
Dr. DRAGONET

Illustrator WEST

city around us choked with vines, a-crawl with huge snakes, a-rustle with giant spiders, and a-creep with great black panthers. Hypnotic suggestion, we had told ourselves afterwards, not very confidently. Although Southern California is a land of fakers, and Los Angeles a city of illusion, Marty, Alice and I find it difficult to write off Dr. Hugo Dragonet simply as a charlatan.

Now we looked at four pairs of black goggles. Each pair had a fine wire connecting one of the massive bows to a black-enameled power pack or control device about as big as a package of



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kingsize cigarettes and reminiscent of the subconscious hearing aids.

"You say these gadgets will let you see thoughts?" Marty asked. The Doctor shook his head. "I didn't say thoughts I said *minds*." "I don't know that I like the idea," Alice said.

I didn't exactly like the four white canes hooked over the back of the Doctor's big chair. Taken together with the goggles they looked much too much like equipment for three blind men and one blind girl.

Nevertheless I reached out and gingerly drew the nearest pair of goggles to me along with its trailing flat black box. So did Alice and Marty. Dr. Dragonet's gadgets are always a shade more fascinating by the fact that they are frightening. He had the charlatan's gift of always arousing interest, sometimes by fabulous hints, sometimes as now by silence.

But he was grinning at me and the grin had a fatherly-sardonic twist to it, as if he had read my suspicious thoughts and was amused. Alice, Marty and I like to think of ourselves as reasonably mature—a fairly successful sculpture-actress, newspaperman and writer—but Hugo Dragonet has a way of treating us as if we are a trio of bright children, whom it pleases him occasionally to provide with wonderful toys. None of us can decide whether he is really a charlatan or a brilliant physicist-physiologist who works completely freelance and has not chosen (at least as yet) to share his important discoveries with the world of academic and industrial science. So far as we know, the Doctor supports himself solely—though quite lavishly—by specialized and little-known inventions in the realms of film and TV effects and by his occasional services as technical advisor to the studios on psychiatric and anthropological movies. If he cashes in on his important inventions (or his charlatanism, if it's that), we haven't an inkling of it and his patrons (or his victims) move in lofty circles quite unknown to us. What we are agreed upon, all three of us, is that we look forward to and are wholly fascinated by our little meetings with him—even if we always do feel a bit uneasy as we approach them.

AS I uncertainly fingered my pair of goggles and carefully drew the companion box to me by the fine connecting wire, I wondered if this was one of the important inventions and if so how it would work. Four pairs of black goggles . . . four gleaming black kingsize boxes, each with two tiny switches on it, one gray and rough, the other white and smooth . . . four white

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canes . . . I was still bothered by the implications.

Not that there was anything sinister about our surroundings, though they would have given a sensitive person a touch of vertigo. The cantilevered, black-flagged, magnesium-roofed terrace thrust out like the flying bridge of a futuristic ship from Dr. Dragonet's house, which lifted from an easterly crest of the Santa Monica Mountains, as if the house in turn were the figurehead of a ship of hills, with Hollywood below us to the south, the San Fernando Valley below us to the north, while before us to the southeast, sprouting white skyscrapers and slashed by freeways and only faintly hazed today by smog, stretched the central sections of sprawlingly spacious Los Angeles. Behind us were the mountains, the westering sun, and the invisible Pacific.

The inevitable Hollywood note of the fabulous and fake was provided by a white-walled gilt-domed group of small buildings on the hillside just below. Even at this distance, looking across the intervening lawn and flowerbeds, we could read the neat black-on-white sign: GREATER COSMIC FELLOWSHIP.

The mildly exotic atmosphere of the terrace itself was pointed up by a few earthenware oriental figures and a remarkably realistic ceramic of a kinkajou, which looked as though the thick-tailed, dark yellow Asiatic carnivore had been frozen in mid-scamper along a dead branch.

Karl, the Doctor's squarely built chauffeur and precision machinist, sat on the northern verge of the terrace, where steps go down to the garage and the magnificent machine shop where he fabricates the Doctor's inventions, presumably including these goggles.

Karl was methodically turning the pages of *The Los Angeles Times*. Impet, the Doctor's slim black cat, snoozed in the sun on the southern edge. Otherwise we were completely alone.

The round gray-topped table was poker size. Alice sat to my left, Marty to my right, the Doctor across. The only things on the table were the four goggle-sets and a square of dull whitish sheet-metal about a foot wide.

Marty touched a goggle set. "See *Minds*, you said?" The Doctor just nodded.

I BEGAN to inspect closely the black instruments in my hands. I saw that I had been right in thinking of them as goggles rather than glasses, for although they had bows like glasses there was a wide spongy black flange going back from each lens that I could see would fit against the skin of cheek and orbit,

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shutting out all light from the sides.

Then I looked at the lenses themselves, first from the front, then from the back—without putting them on—in growing perplexity. All I could think of for a moment was a demonstration the Doctor had once put on for us of a girl who told colors blindfolded and read books through heavy cardboard. Alice made my point first.

"You can't see through them," she said. "They seem to be made of a black metal." She hadn't put hers on either.

Hugo Dragonet smiled and nodded.

Marty carried his own pair over into the sunlight. Impet looked up resentfully. Marty turned the glasses front to back toward the sun and looked through one lens cautiously.

"No, they're not like eclipse glasses," the Doctor called after him. "You couldn't see even an atomic blast through them. They're opaque to X rays too, probably to *all* electric light—using the term to mean the whole electromagnetic spectrum."

Marty returned excitedly. "But if that's true, it's amazing, Doctor! This black metal would be the perfect material to shield atomic reactors! Might work for bomb shelters too!"

Hugo Dragonet yawned. Impet cradled his head between his paws and went back to sleep.

Marty flushed and chewed his lip. Besides being an incurable enthusiast, Marty is quite an idealist and patriot, and what he calls the Doctor's cynical and frivolous impracticality gets under his skin.

"To return to matters of real interest," the Doctor said, "these goggles *are* transparent to rays of both the gravitoelectric and magnetogravitic spectra and, when properly excited, will translate bands of those spectra into visible colors."

"But Doctor," Marty burst out, irrepressibly, "those other two spectra are just an obscure possibility from field theory. There's absolutely no evidence for their existence."

"Are you sure of that?" Hugo Dragonet asked softly, weighing the fourth pair of goggles in his palm. "However I don't insist that you accept my explanations," he added with a smile. "Explanations are never the most interesting part of science."

"Doctor, how do the goggles help to see minds?" Alice put in hurriedly.

"Why, my dear," he said, "they translate into electric or visible light two narrow bands of gravitic and magnetic light—if, purely for convenience, I may use those terms," he added elabo-

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rately with a sardonic little bow toward Marty. The Doctor likes to needle our young science reporter.

Marty blushed.

Keeping it simple like Alice, I asked, "How do minds show up in the gravitic and magnetic light?"

The Doctor did not answer my question. Instead he put on his pair of black goggles and tucked the attached black box into the top of his outside breast pocket with the two switches facing front.

It made him look like a blind man.

After a bit he reached his right hand across his chest and pushed the gray switch, then sat back stolidly. I got the impression he was counting under his breath.

Paper rustled faintly as Karl turned another page. Impet sat up and stared intently at the Doctor, seeming to study the change the goggles had made in his face. The sunlight struck bronze tints from the cat's black fur.

TIME stretched out. Karl swatted something with his newspaper—he has a thing about insects—and took up the next section.

Then the Doctor touched the white switch. Immediately he sat forward in his chair and looked long and carefully at each of us in turn—first me, then Marty, then Alice.

His goggles were more opaque-seeming than ever—round flats of dull black metal—but I never in my life had such an intense sensation of someone looking through me or rather *into* me.

He frowned at me—at least the vertical furrows deepened above the bridge of his goggles—and he gave a faint grunt of what sounded like surprise.

When he looked at Marty his grunt seemed to say "Just as I thought," but when he turned to Alice there was a rising note to his "Umm," as though he had found something that tickled his imagination.

"What *is* it, Doctor?" Alice asked nervously, shrinking back in her seat. "You're acting like an X-ray machine."

Hugo Dragonet smiled. "Why don't you try the goggles?" he said. "Why don't you all try them? And see for yourself? Just put them on and then follow my directions. Only one thing: once you're wearing them, don't take them off until I tell you."

Suddenly I was no longer reluctant but fumblingly eager to get the goggles on. I judged from my last jumbled glimpse that Marty and Alice were the same. But as the thick black flanges settled down against my skull, I had a flurry of unexpected panic.

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The rubbery material seemed not so much to touch my skin as to kiss it suckingly and for a moment I had the gruesome fear of suction applied to my eyeballs. I started to snatch the things off, then told myself not to be a nervous fool.

"Take it easy," I heard the Doctor say as if from a considerable distance. "Make sure they're comfortable. But remember, no peeking. And don't throw the little switches until I tell you."

I realized that in my rush I'd forgotten about the control box—if that was what it was—so I ghosted my fingertips down the wire from the left bow until they felt the box, which I slid halfway down into my breast pocket as I'd seen the Doctor do.

"Don't be in a hurry," he was saying. "Just as at the planetarium, if we wait a bit our eyes get more sensitive to the darkness."

But this was more than darkness, I realized with another spurt of inward panic, it was blackness complete and absolute. You know how when you close your eyes in no matter how dark a room, you always see churning specks of light and faint washes of color—even if you don't apply pressure, which can bring on blue flashes and all sorts of things? Well, now there wasn't anything of that sort at all, just velvety limitless darkness—*black* black, if I may call it that. It didn't make sense to me, because I'd always thought that the churning specks weren't due to light at all but just a random automatic discharge of a few of the retinal cells, which would go on whether there was an atom of light or not. Unless, I suggested to myself, the goggles had some sort of general inhibiting effect? It really seemed quite incredible that I should still be sitting on a bright terrace with dazzling golden sunlight striking a few yards away and not getting one hint of it—not even a reddish glow transmitted through the flesh of my cheeks—just because of a pair of goggles, and for a moment I had the thought of Dr. Dragonet rearing up leanly and blotting out the sun like some Old Testament prophet or medieval sorcerer. Or suppose these goggles literally blinded their wearer? Suppose—

I WAS about to disobey instructions and take the things off when I heard the Doctor say, "Now you might each of you gently depress the gray switch, as you saw me do. It's the rough-surfaced one.

"Don't expect to see anything startling, or even much of anything at all," he added. "This part is merely preliminary and doesn't work too well for every-

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one. But it creates a *framework*."

At first I thought I must be one of the ones for whom this part didn't work, whatever it was, then I became aware that the absolute blackness had been invaded by large shapes of dark gray faintly edged with silver. At first I thought they made only an arbitrary geometrical pattern, but then I realized that they added up to an extremely dark picture of the table in front of me and the terrace around us —with this important difference, that my companions had vanished, I could see only the three empty chairs. But it was all extremely faint—maybe it was just my imagination, it occurred to me; or maybe the Doctor was using suggestion on me —some sort of hypnotic deal, as we'd tried to tell ourselves about the subconscious hearing aids.

"But I can't see *us*," I heard Alice say excitedly. "I can't even see my own hand."

"It's like a very overdeveloped negative of the terrace with the people left out," I heard Marty add in puzzled tones.

"You are now seeing by gravitic light," came the cool but heavier voice of Hugo Dragonet. "Gravitic light is reflected by most inorganic materials—metals, minerals and so on—though not all—for instance, you can't see each other's goggles. But *all* organic materials—animals, plants, the clothing made from plant fiber or animal wool or simply any carbon-based material—are transparent to gravitic light and so don't show up."

I looked around. Sure enough, Karl and Impet were both invisible, assuming they were still sitting where I'd seen them last. Much more startling to me, the ceramic kinkajou was also gone, although the earthenware figures remained, suggesting that the kinkajou wasn't ceramic at all but some sort of literally frozen animal flesh. I started to ask the Doctor about it, then remembered that it usually doesn't do to ask Hugo Dragonet about extraneous mysteries glimpsed while exploring a main one. There are some parts of his life, such as his years in Vietnam—old Indochina then—that he doesn't talk about.

One of the many odd things about my present vision of my surroundings was that the sun-drenched outside looked no brighter than the shaded terrace. And it was a frighteningly *empty* world.

"Of course you are not seeing by gravitic light directly," the Doctor's voice cut in, "but by the electric light your goggles translate it into. The goggles are adjusted to keep it very dim. It's just a framework or background for what you'll be seeing next—by magnetic light. Which re-

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minds me, it's time for you to throw the white switch—the smooth one."

THIS time I hesitated on the brink. Alice gave an involuntary cry in which there was more wonder than fear. I depressed my switch.

Over each of the three chairs, exactly where my friends' heads would be, hung a ghostly globe of colored light.

Marty's and Alice's were identical shades of green. Hugo Dragonet's was blue shot with streaks of dark red—and much brighter, though none of the globes were very bright: they were like compact clouds of phosphorescent mist.

And they weren't perfect globes either. Marty's almost was, at least it had very sharp boundaries, but its shape was that of a large egg tipped forward—the shape of Marty's brain if the skull were removed. Its green glow was brightest to the front.

By contrast the Doctor's globe was misty-edged. The dark red streaks that banded the bright blue kept fading, changing, reappearing.

Alice's globe tapered down into a ghostly but recognizable replica of her face. It was as if a gossamer mask hung from the green globe.

And that was all. No, not quite. On the table in front of Alice alone were very faint folded curves of light, like fingers.

Then the Doctor spoke. His voice seemed to me to be coming out of the globe of blue light. Natural enough, I suppose—just normal sound-localization—but the effect was monstrously eerie.

"You are now seeing by magnetic light," the blue globe (I mean the Doctor) said. "Magnetic light is generated solely by mental activity—specifically by consciousness or awareness. I sometimes call it mind light. In fact, you're seeing minds."

"You mean we're seeing each other thinking?" the mask-trailing green globe on my left (Alice, of course) asked wonderingly.

"In a way, yes."

"We're seeing each other's thoughts?" she pressed.

"Alas, no. Perhaps some day we will find a prism, a lens, some way of refocussing mind light, so that we can actually see the little inner world of form and color and feeling that is another person's consciousness. But not yet. Now all we are seeing is the diffuse outward glow of inward awareness—the envelope or aura of thought. It's possible that throughout history a few individuals have been sporadically sensitive to mind light without translating goggles—accounting for persistent mystical beliefs

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about human auras and the halos of saints."

IT hit me all of a sudden what a terrific gimmick for spiritualism these goggles would be. Believers would pay limitlessly to see auras, to see their own minds glowing like spheres of pure incorruptible light. But right away I ran into the snag of the Doctor's apparent disinterest in con money or build-up. In any case my vague suspicions couldn't compete for long with the amazement I was feeling. The simple awe of the thing began to take hold of me.

"We're seeing brain waves," Alice said huskily.

"I don't believe so, my dear," the Doctor told her. "So-called brain waves are simply tiny rhythmic changes of electric potential in the flesh around the skull."

"But we *are* seeing nervous activity," Marty suddenly put in sharply.

"If that were true," the Doctor replied, "we'd see the spine, the whole nerve-tree, as sharply as the brain. No, we're seeing the glow of *consciousness*—that inward world of awareness that means life and identity, that little cosmos locked inside the skull that is all of reality to each of us. As I've said before, we're seeing *minds*."

None of us said anything for a while then, as it sank in. The awe of the thing gripped me completely. Mind Light!

"I'm not all locked inside my skull," Alice nervously broke the silence at last. "I can see my hands." And as she said that, the ghostly fingers became a little more definitely outlined.

"That's because you're a sculptress," the Doctor answered. "You send your awareness into your fingers—molding, shaping. You literally see and think with your hands—like some blind man I'd watched by magnetic light. By contrast Marty and Arthur show a sharply delimited consciousness, as if it actually were skull-bounded—they're word-and-idea men, rationalists.

"Whereas you're an artist," he continued to Alice, "and an actress too, highly conscious of your appearance. That's why you project your consciousness into your face as well as your hands."

"I do?" Alice sounded both ashamed and excited. "Doctor, is there some way for me to see myself?"

The Doctor chuckled. A dark grey rectangle lifted from the table. I remembered the square of whitish metal that had been lying there.

"Here's a mirror for mind light," he said to Alice. Her ghostly fingers gripped it, the filmy mask of her face grew a

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trace brighter as she stared at it, then it began to fluctuate as (I suppose) delight and embarrassment struggled together.

"What's the mirror made of?" Marty asked eagerly.

"Something quite unsuitable for reactor shielding or for wrapping gum," the Doctor told him sourly, then continued, "Projected awareness is rather common. Occasional unaided glimpses of it, due to magnetic sensitivity, may account for spiritualists' claims about ectoplasm."

Marty and I looked in turn at the reflections of our mind globes. Mine was sharply bounded like his but more toward the blue.

"Green and blue are the normal range," the Doctor explained. "Blue seems to link with introversion and contemplation, green with extroversion and action. The other colors come in when the *feelings* are involved. Yellow goes with joy, red with savage passions, orange with sensuousness, misery is gray. Violet I've almost never seen."

"Doctor," Alice asked, "why did you say 'Umm' that way when you first saw my mind? Because it was in my face?"

He chuckled. "No," he said, "more because it was exactly the same shade as Martin's—something I've seldom seen except in identical twins and long-married couples."

Alice said, "Hmm." Marty mumbled vaguely.

"Happily married couples," the Doctor added encouragingly. Then, "*I'm* a strange mixture, as you can see," he went on. "Blue, the philosopher's color, shot through with sudden animal impulses—the dark red. The old orang at the zoo has a mind that's *all* that second color."

"You've been out with these goggles?" I asked.

"Of course, Arthur. You wouldn't expect me to pass up a new way to pry into people, would you? I carry a white cane and pose as a blind man, mostly to justify the glasses. Karl always goes with me, pretending to guide me. Actually I do need his help from time to time—the dim gravitic background-light is not very useful in fast traffic. Besides, there are some people who don't have visible minds at all—blacked-out drunks, for one thing—and I don't want to go bumping into them."

"Will *we* be able to go out?" Alice asked.

"You counted the canes behind my chair, didn't you? First, though, we'll have a look at the mind-map. Come on."

THE banded blue globe rose and the doctor's chair pushed back. I got up cautiously, feeling at the table edge. It was very strange to feel it and to see it

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by gravitic light, but not see my hands that were doing the feeling—ghosts must have such sensations, I thought. Just then a very faint globe of yellowish light about as big as a tennis ball flashed up onto the table (or bounced up, it seemed to me) and moved toward the Doctor. The word *Poltergeist* jumped into my mind at the same instant, and I felt the back of my neck crawl, but just then the Doctor said, "Come on, Impet, you too," and the pale little globe was lifted close to the bright blue one.

"Cats do have minds, you see," he said. "All the higher animals appear to have consciousness and awareness."

I had a strong impulse to take off my goggles and check for myself that the weird sight was only the Doctor carrying his cat, but I remembered his warning and refrained.

"What's this mind-map and where do you keep it?" Marty asked.

"I'll show you," the Doctor said and led us toward the southern edge of the terrace. Although it was well-defined in gravitic light I felt uneasy about the edge because it's unrailed and at that point the drop to the flower beds is considerable, but the Doctor stopped short of it, and I noticed that an olive globe had appeared beside us—Karl, I supposed. Once more I suppressed the impulse to check.

"Look," said Dr. Dragonet.

The lights of Los Angeles seen from the hills behind Hollywood can be a most spectacular sight. Now it seemed to me as if I were seeing them on a very smoggy night, or—more precisely—seeing them as they would be if a giant rheostat dimmed all of them greatly though leaving hints of their neon coloring.

Gravitic light showed little of the city's structure and barely distinguished dark land from darker sky. It was almost a plane of solid black that backgrounded the faint glow of mind light that faded off toward the horizon in faint patches and rivulets.

We watched silently for some time. The Doctor said, "Notice how it keeps getting a little brighter? When you first switched on the magnetic light, you wouldn't have noticed any of this distant stuff at all. You'll go on getting more sensitive the longer you wear the goggles—up to three hours. But just one flash of ordinary light will cancel your sensitivity—that's why I warned you against peeking."

I asked, "What's the brighter glow due south? Downtown? And the one far off to the west?"

"You mean *that* and *that?*" the Doctor asked. A pale yellow blob moved to indicate the two directions—I realized he was us-

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ing Impet for a pointer. "No, that's not downtown, that's the University of Southern California, while the one to the west is UCLA, though it may run into RAND. While that one off to the east over the hills—you missed that—is Cal Tech." He chuckled. "It amused me greatly to discover that more thinking actually does go on at universities."

He gestured again with Impet. "But many of those bright patches I can't interpret at all. I haven't explored them yet, or they keep shifting. And I can't explain that violet glow just below us. With one exception I've never seen violet anywhere else."

Alice said, "If your blue and red would mix, it might make violet."

Meanwhile I studied the glow he'd just pointed out and asked, "Doesn't that come from the Greater Cosmic Fellowship? But why should a bunch of crackpots have a rare color?"

Alice laughed nervously. "Maybe they're Martians. Great planet-hoppers, the Martians, especially in cartoons."

"What made you say Martians?" the Doctor demanded with a sharpness that startled me.

"I don't know—I guess I always call anything from off the Earth Martians," Alice explained fumblingly. "Doctor, I was only joking. I didn't really think you'd take me seriously."

"I know you didn't," he told her. "But you know me, I take everything seriously—except practical matters."

"What's the one violet exception?" I wanted to know.

"I may show you later, Arthur."

Marty now spoke up at last, his voice sighing with wonder. "Doctor, I've just been thinking what a terrific advantage mind light would be for espionage, or military patrolling, or even simple police work. Doctor, in this instance wouldn't you be willing to let the government in on—"

Dr. Dragonet yawned audibly, then tossed Impet to the floor and said briskly, "How about that outing I promised all of you? Good! Just remember to keep your goggles on at all times—one peek ruins the sensitivity. Karl, get the car—but first bring us the canes!

THE rest of that afternoon and night we saw Los Angeles as black canyons and caves through which minds streamed like globes of undissolving mist driven by random winds.

Karl not only chauffeured and shepherded us, but also quietly interpreted the passing scenes. Otherwise we would not always have been sure what we were watching, for a mind shows neither sex nor race nor (generally)

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age and certainly carries no signs of class or station, poverty or wealth.

We saw freeways racing with wraithlike gravitic-sketched cars, in each of which poised one or a few of the phosphorescent spheres.

We saw a silver-gray cemetery where minds floated like ghosts among the tombstones—unutterably eerie even after Karl had described to us the funeral party he saw by ordinary light.

We saw dim minds, murky orange mostly, behind the bars at the Griffith Park Zoo. The old orang's was dark red, just as the Doctor had said. Even the snakes had shadowy minds, though Karl would not accompany us into the reptile house. Karl classes snakes with insects and arachnids.

We saw the golden minds of a jazz band. We saw projected orange mind twinkling in the feet of a dancer.

In a church we saw a scattering of dim indigo minds, like patches of light from deep blue stained glass.

In a skid row bar we saw smoky amber minds winking on and off like fireflies.

We saw red minds in a gang rumble.

We saw a mind vanish suddenly in a crimson burst when a driver was thrown and killed in a freeway accident. That made us ask the Doctor a question. He answered softly, "Wearing the goggles, I have watched death in hospitals. The light only faded and then winked out."

We saw minds sun-hued with joy at the beach, glowing minds in a schoolroom, and (so Alice insisted) the silver-rosy minds of lovers.

Once we saw a violet mind in the rear of a car driven by an ordinary green mind, and remembering what the Doctor had said, we instantly asked Karl for a description. But our curiosity was thwarted in this instance—the car was a small panel truck. We asked the Doctor if this was the violet mind he'd promised to show us, but he denied it.

MANY times I was tempted to take off my goggles—more for the kick of verifying the incredible than because of fatigue or any lingering suspicions of trickery on the Doctor's part—but I hated to lose my ever-growing sensitivity to mind light. You see, by now I was becoming convinced that there was much more to be seen by mind light than I'd observed so far—faint things that hovered on the edge of vision. There was the suggestion that some minds had tenuous *tentacles* of mind light and that sometimes the tips of these tentacles plunged into other minds—I'll swear that once I saw one mind leading five or

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six others, like dogs on leashes. There were hints, too, that some brains held more minds than one—shadowy splits and mergers, dominations, possessions, vampirisms, clashes, battles. Once I seemed to see a mind flow around another, engulfing or perhaps dissolving it. I kept peering—I admit it—for minds without bodies.

Also I occasionally seemed to see a trace of color in the cold gravitic gray of some material objects—as if some minds were projecting themselves into things, or even the inanimate itself struggling toward awareness.

I asked the Doctor about these things, whether they were reality or imagination, but he would only say, "Keep watching."

Finally he told Karl to drive us back to his home. We sped out of the mind-dazzle of the city into the blackness of the hills.

The Doctor said, "I'm glad you've all followed my suggestion about keeping the goggles on without intermission. At least I hope you have. By now your eyes should be about sensitive enough for something rather special I want to show you. The desert or the mountains or the open sea would be better, but this local outback will have to do. Slide back the top of the car, Karl."

A moment later, "Look up," said Hugo Dragonet.

Desert nights have taught me the shape of the Milky Way. Smog blots it out in Los Angeles or any other city.

But tonight, very faintly but definitely, I saw the unmistakable shape of our galaxy a-glow over Los Angeles with muted rainbow light.

"Mind," Alice whispered, "all over the universe, beating on us in tiny waves."

As she said that, I could almost feel it on my skin—incredibly delicate flakes sifting down.

"How can something faint as mind light travel so far?" I wondered.

Dr. Dragonet said: "Who can say how dim minds are on other worlds? Or how bright? There may be minds like novas."

"What's that point of violet light near the horizon to the south?" Marty asked suddenly.

"You should know," the Doctor told him. "I thought you kept track of the planets."

Marty said: "Mars."

The Doctor commented, "So you see why I was struck by Alice associating violet with Martians." He laughed thinly. "An interesting coincidence."

AT that moment the car was climbing past the small, gravitic-etched domes of the Greater Cosmic Fellowship—making another coincidence, I told myself.

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"I'm going to regret taking these goggles off," Alice said, "and seeing things by ordinary electric light." I realized I felt reluctant about it too and I found myself recalling the German psychologist who wore glasses that turned everything upside-down for so long that upside-down became normal and when he finally took the glasses off, everything seemed to be standing on its head.

As Karl was putting the car away, we started up the stairs to the terrace, the doctor just ahead of me, Marty and Alice lagging behind. In a few hours I'd got so used to gravitic light that the steep steps were no great challenge.

There was a sudden hissing ahead of us, then a single enraged or terrified squall. A small pale globe came streaking down past us from the terrace, not pausing at the Doctor's "Impet!"

I was beside him as we mounted the last steps. Marty and Alice were just behind.

I became aware of a wholly unfamiliar odor—acrid, nauseating.

A glowing sphere, the brightest mind I had seen yet, was on the other side of the terrace.

It hung only inches above the flagging.

Its color was violet.

Footsteps pounded on the steps behind us and I heard Karl call, "I'm coming, Doctor!" The olive sphere of his mind appeared beside me.

With a dry rustling like light bony plates or metallic feathers scraping together, the violet mind across the terrace swiftly reared up to a height of eight or nine feet.

There was a clucking gasp of horror beside me, a swallowed scream. Simultaneously Karl's mind flared and winked out and I heard his body slump to the flagging.

"Keep your goggles on!" the Doctor cried.

The next voice I heard came from the violet mind towering across the room. It spoke English, but it was the mechanical English of a talking machine, or voder, that is operated by a keyboard and puts words together like snippets of magnetized wire. Yet in spite of its mechanical quality it conveyed an impression of power, intellectual and otherwise, that made me cringe.

VODER: Dr. Hugo Dragonet, I presume?

DR. D: What do you mean, sir, by this unheralded intrusion?

VODER: Really, Dr. Dragonet, I think you have little cause for surprise.

As the conversation between the Doctor and the violet mind went on, I was several times tempted to take off my goggles. Along with my terror I felt an

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agonizing curiosity, a gnawing desire to know if I could bear to see what had made Karl faint—if that was all that had happened to him. Truthfully, I was grateful that the Doctor had ordered us all to keep them on. I was even more grateful for the courage and poise he showed as he answered the voder voice.

DR. D: It is true that I have been half expecting someone. At least I have considered the possibility. (*Then to us*) Keep the goggles on!

VODER: And you too, Doctor. It will be wiser if we do not see each other in the . . . I am not sure if "flesh" is the word I want, at least for myself.

DR. D: May I ask what attracted your attention to my dwelling?

VODER: Can't you guess, Doctor? We recently became aware that there were instruments in it sensitive to the magnetic light of consciousness. *Our* instruments detected *your* instruments.

DR. D: That seems reasonable enough.

VODER: Doctor Dragonet, are you aware of where I come from?

DR. D: I believe so. The Greater Cosmic Fellowship?

VODER: You are tactful, perhaps even elusive. I mean are you aware of where I come from—originally?

DR. D: If I must hazard a guess, the planet Mars.

VODER: That is correct.

DR. D: (to us) Keep the goggles on!

VODER: And now I must ask you, Dr. Dragonet, what you intend to do with your knowledge.

DR. D: Nothing. Nothing at all.

VODER: Excuse me, Dr. Dragonet, but I find that difficult to believe.

DR. D: Why, sir? What would you expect me to do?

VODER: Well, sir, I would expect you to inform your government, your police and military authorities, of the presence of Martians in the city of Los Angeles. Since most of your fellows have not been educated to an acceptance of intelligence in physical shapes different from their own, this information, once confirmed, would lead to raids, riots, panic, and a general demand for the immediate extermination of all the extraterrestrials. Attempts would be made to root out our innocent little observation post. Such attempts would encounter resistance, since we Martians are burdened with the same self-preservatory instincts as yourselves and have besides a certain dignity to maintain as peaceful extraterrestrial observers from a senior planet. The result would be a brisk skirmish—more likely, as Mars is rather stuffy about protecting her own, a full-scale interplanetary war.

DR. D: Exactly.

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VODER: *Excuse me, I do not* quite understand.

DR. D: I think you do. What I mean is that you have described exactly what would be likely to happen if I should inform Terran authorities about your presence on earth. And so, as I have already told you, I propose to do nothing. Nothing at all.

VODER: Ah! I must confess I did not expect such a civilized decision from an earthling.

DR. D: Come, come! Earthmen aren't absolute idiots!

VODER: I am beginning to appreciate that, Doctor. I must say I am greatly relieved that this is your decision. It excuses me from taking certain steps, unpleasant to you and your companions, which I would otherwise have been obliged to carry out.

DR. D: Or attempt to.

VODER: Yes, sir, attempt to. Though I fancy that with our greater destructive powers—

DR. D: *We* are not altogether powerless you know.

VODER: That too, I suppose, is possible. Excuse me for bringing up such unpleasant matters.

DR. D: Certainly, certainly.

VODER: Dr. Dragonet, can you offer us assurance that your companions will be properly secretive?

DR. D: I vouch for them. You have my word.

VODER: That is sufficient.

DR. D: Thank you. And now, I *don't wish to seem inhospitable,* but . . .

VODER: (The violet globe bowed with a repetition of the dry, rustling sound): Of course. I will depart immediately. I can understand that this interview must be something of a strain to junior minds. I trust, however, Dr. Dragonet, that there will be opportunities for you and I to discuss in private matters of interest to two philosophical denizens of the cosmos?

DR. D: Surely. Come back at any time I'm alone.

VODER: Thank you, Dr. Dragonet. Farewell, friends.

DIPPING close to the flagging again, the violet globe rapidly headed toward the edge of the terrace. Although I still found the accompanying rustling or heavy scuttling sound detestible, my earlier fears had been stilled enough by the strange urbane conversation I'd just heard so I thought I might risk a look.

I lifted my hands to my temples, but, "Keep the goggles on!" commanded Dr. Dragonet.

The violet globe went over the edge. Not long afterwards the Doctor said, "It's all right now, I imagine, to take them off."

Normal vision was something of an anticlimax. The terrace was very dark. And chilly. The first thing I did was turn on some lights.

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The Doctor was kneeling by Karl, who came out of his faint quickly now and seemed almost embarrassed by it. Yet when asked what he had seen, he almost fainted again. Then he said firmly, "What I saw was some sort of black centipede four yards long with eyes big as saucers. It reared and swayed like a cobra. In its upper claws it had a black box with a keyboard on it."

At that point Marty, Alice and I all started to talk at once, but the Doctor, pleading weariness, refused to enter into a discussion of any sort. However, while scanning the flowerbeds below for evidence of the creature's trail between the terrace and the Fellowship, he did say, almost apologetically, to Marty, "I'm sure you can see why it's the better part of wisdom to keep the authorities out of cases like this."

Then gazing thoughtfully at the white walls looming faintly through the dark, he said, shaking his head, "You certainly never know whom you have for neighbors in Hollywood. Good night, children—I'm beat."

Impet appeared at the top of the steps, crossed the terrace very gingerly, and sniffed the spot where the creature had gone over the edge. Then, backing away with a hiss that seemed her last word on the subject, she went into the house.

"Good night," the Doctor repeated to us, following her.

Driving down from the hills with Marty and Alice I had a try at convincing them that the whole business could have been a hoax—at least the Martian episode (perhaps the Doctor simply had an earth friend with a violet mind)—but I didn't begin to convince even myself.

THE END

THE CREATOR

(continued from page 31)

within the scope of the great purple globe? And I wonder how large the globe has grown.

I realize now that our effort to save the universe was unnecessary so far as the earth was concerned, for the earth, moving at its greater time-speed, would already have plunged into extinction in the flaming furnace of the sun before the Creator could carry out his destructive plans.

But what of those other worlds? What of those other planets which must surely swim around strange suns in the gulf of space? What of the planets and races yet unborn? What of the populations that may exist on the solar systems of island universes far removed from our own?

They are saved, saved for all time; for the purple globe will guard the handiwork of the Creator through eternity.

THE END

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SOLOMON'S DEMON

By ARTHUR PORGES

Illustrator SUMMERS

The Gothic tale of terror is seldom seen in these days of plot and character. But here, for old time's sake, is a fine example of the ghastly evil that rages in the dark of night.

THERE was no doubt that the old house had an aura of evil, but Barry Selden never believed for a moment that it was actually haunted. Such things might be all very well in England or the wilds of Dracula's Transylvania—assuming that the Reds would tolerate any supernatural deviationists—but not in New England. Besides, even his uncle had not mentioned any ghost; he had merely made obscure implications through the will. Obviously George Kaelin had wasted a good property in permitting this fine old place to lie vacant for fifty years. Imagine a house these days, and in a good tourist area, too, with high rents, lacking electricity. A crowning irony, since just beyond the north fence the great steel towers marched across the fields shouldering high tension wires. And nothing in the building but rusty kerosene lamps.

Well, the estate was Selden's now. Uncle George, in the will, and urged him neither to live there nor to sell out. He even objected, it would seem, to tearing the house down and putting up a more modern one, although the land and location were quite valuable, protected from neighbors by a good buffering of scenic meadow. The old man had been maddeningly vague, hinting at some evil secret hidden in the basement, something it would be dangerous to disturb. The fellow was surely a kook.

And yet, from the moment he'd

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moved in, with a view to preparing the place for his wife, Selden had been uneasy; no, he might as well admit it—scared. For the first time in years, he kept a light burning in his room all night. And surely it was significant that he'd picked the one farthest from that damp, dark basement. For a week now, he'd been exploring the house, making plans for remodeling, but still avoiding a detailed inspection of the cellar. But he couldn't delay much longer and keep his self-respect. There were some interesting old trunks down there that suggested the possibility of valuable antiques. If so, they might pay for modernizing the house. Today, therefore, it must be done. He would take one of the gasoline lamps—he'd brought two—down there, and look around. Then, when Valerie arrived, on Monday, they could make decisions.

IMMEDIATELY after lunch—luckily he'd been able to get a little butane stove in town—he began. It was fascinating to search the boxes and bales. Most of the clothing was hopelessly mouldy; but there were other items, some of them real treasures: books, including a couple of good Melvilles; some valuable glass; and a box of superb scrimshaw work in whalebone, ivory, and assorted teeth. At the sight of it, Selden recalled that Uncle George's grandfather, who built the house, had been a whaler, as well as a blackbirder, in the 1840's.

The scrimshaw work—delicate, ingenious carvings—was of excellent quality and great artistic merit, worth hundreds of dollars. After all, each piece meant weeks of painstaking work on the part of some whaler with too much time on his hands between kills. Selden gloated over the stuff. This item he would keep; it was too nice to sell; that one, too, would hold Val's jewelry . . .

At the very bottom of the box, wrapped in musty canvas, he found something else. Just a plate of yellowed ivory, perhaps four by five inches, cut apparently, from a single huge elephant's tusk. At the eight of it, he sucked in his breath.

Selden was familiar with many masterpieces of the grotesque, including those of the brilliant German school, but this displayed a primitive power beyond his experience, even though the artist must have been an illiterate seaman with only a sheathknife as an engraving tool.

The carving depicted a scene of nightmare context on the deck of a ship. One man, presumably the captain, from his dress, was cringing against the rail with an expression of sick disbelief on his

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face. He was holding a small black box, the size of a brick. Before him, a sailor lay dead. He appeared to have been a giant of herculean build, perhaps cock of the fo'c'stle, yet one of his arms had been torn off at the shoulder, and his face was a shapeless ruin of mangled flesh.

Three other men were engaged in a gallant but obviously hopeless fight with a most appalling monster. It was tall, standing fully ten inches above the biggest sailor, cadaverously thin, and fearfully banded with wire-like muscles. One huge taloned paw still clutched the red rags of the dead man's face; the other was cramming the end of the severed arm into the gaping mouth. The creature wore a sort of tattered grey robe, through which its pale skin, sparsely dotted with green hair, gleamed obscenely.

Worst of all were the eyes, yellow and without pupils. They shone with unquenchable hatred, and their intelligence was beastlike, rather than human, in their animal lack of restraint.

The thing was earless, and had only a single moist pit for a nose, but its mouth was a jungle of teeth like great glass splinters, running far back into the mighty jaws.

The carving was carefully colored, and seemed to Selden to have a vitality beyond any mere fantasy. The scene it recorded could not have happened, except in the sick mind of the artist, and yet, in the clammy cellar, with the gas lamp hissing, and no other humans within earshot, he began to shake as if agued. And suddenly, unable to resist the irrational panic, he seized the lamp, and plaque in his other hand, bolted.

Upstairs, in the more reassuring atmosphere of his room, and bolstered by two stiff Martinis, he found himself more calm, and able to examine the carving further. His first impulse was to rationalize the monster's physical proportions. No doubt the artist, as a slave catcher, could have seen a gorilla. This conception was probably based on such a brute. You could make the big-ape taller, modify its head, give it a remnant of clothing to intensify the horror of its pseudo-humanity . . . But Selden couldn't convince himself. Actually, there was no resemblance to any of the large primates, except in strength.

Defeated in this line of speculation, Selden casually flipped the ivory from one hand to the other. The moment he saw the reverse of it, enlightenment came, for there, on the back, was a neatly carved inscription. Except for some misspellings, it read:

The encounter of the men of the *Sarah Hackett* with a malignant spirit of the Night. How an

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evil demon, sealed up since the days of Solomon, was accidentally released by Captain Barker. It tore off the face and right arm of First Mate Ezekiel Sharpe, and then daunted by the light, which it cannot abide, retreated below decks. It was driven back into the box by the Voodoo Priestess, Mamaloi Hannah, who was freed as a reward. June, 1841.

Selden shook his head wonderingly. The unknown artist had gone to great lengths to make this appear the record of a true occurrence. Yet the world of 1840, like that of 1961, had no place for evil spirits bottled up by Solomon. Obviously, nothing like this had ever really happened. Yet beneath his rational scepticism there was the stirring of vague instinctive fears; he recalled the reputation of the old house, and the cellar with its air of brooding menace.

Once more he scrutinized the bit of ivory, and this time, on one edge, in a barely visible scratching in a different hand, he made out the cryptic words: "Sealed Trap."

In his mood of sharpened awareness, the implication seemed clear. Another clue to this fantastic affair had been carefully concealed, undoubtedly by Barker himself. There was a trapdoor, and it must lead to more documentation. Selden knew that he must pursue the matter further. Only a complete investigation could remove the stigma from the house. Once the facts were established, reason would prevail, and he need no longer feel childish fears in the cellar.

BUT it was getting quite dark now; and when he thought of returning to the basement, his nerve began to fail him. Why not wait until morning? There wasn't any hurry; Val wasn't due until late afternoon. But self contempt for his cowardice was prodding him into action. He was no baby to be frightened of a cellar. An excellent middleweight boxer, college champion on the horizontal bars, veteran of Korea—hadn't he fought down panic before? Yet even as he told himself this, he knew, too, that each man has something he fears above all else, fire, or snakes, or dying of cancer. There was no shame in such a weakness; it was part of being human. Why, even the imaginary monster of the picture ran from light.

Finally curiosity and shame triumphed over deeper instincts. He took one gas lamp, leaving the second burning in his room—the only illumination in the big house—and went back down. Once in the cellar, he put the lantern on an old highboy, so that it cast a cheery golden pool

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over most of the room, and began a systematic search for a hidden trapdoor.

The floor was covered with the dust of decades, but he found a tattered broom and swept away at all the open spaces. The solid masonry looked as if it hadn't been touched since having been laid down over a century earlier.

Having drawn a blank from that phase of the hunt, there was nothing left but to shift some of the boxes and trunks. Perhaps the trap was under one of them. So grunting and sweating, he shouldered them aside, one after the other. Still not a single suspicious outline anywhere on the floor.

"One more," he thought. "I'll do just one more, then give it up for tonight."

Even as he told himself this, the quest was over. Pushed by his shoulder, a big trunk grated away from the wall, and there, not in the floor at all, but well above it, was a small wooden door, heavily studded with thick nails.

Filled with impatience. Selden found a pry bar and attacked the stubborn oak. It took twenty minutes, but at last the door swung free. He reached in, found his hand touching something, and pulled it out. At the sight of it, he felt his stomach contract like a clenched fist, spurting sourness up into his throat.

In his hand was a small black box, identical with the one in the carving.

Trembling with emotion, he carried it to a rickety table, and then brought the lamp over. Under its steady light he examined his find. The box was made of some exotic, highly polished wood, and had a lid equipped with heavy hinges of corroded bronze. To his surprise, the only lock was a necklace of vertebrae strung on coarse black hairs, and fastened with a little skin bag. The latter suggested something familiar, and abruptly Selden placed it: a *ouanga* of the sort common to voodoo rituals.

He stood there, box in one hand, thinking hard. Here was a decision to be made, and he was a little ashamed about hesitating. He ought to open the box, and so purge his mind of those irrational fears. But he could still see the captain standing there, sick and appalled by what came out of the little container. There was nothing to lose by waiting. Maybe in the light, with a good rifle, and an anthropologist learned in voodoo matters . . .

At that moment, something stirred inside. It was an experience to break anybody's nerve, and Selden's went. The box slipped from his palsied fingers. It hit the shaky little table hard; a weak leg splintered, and the lantern shattered on the stone

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floor. Instantly the cellar was pitch black.

Completely panicked now, Selden ran for the door. Behind him there was a faint scuffling, and when he turned for one horrified glance, he thought he saw a tall figure with opalescent eyes rising from the box.

IT WAS then that he made a a critical error in tactics. Instead of running for the back door, to open fields, and help, he took the nearest route—the stair case leading to his room. The moment he did so, he realized his mistake. There was no longer any retreat; a few seconds of blind fear, and he had trapped himself at the top of the old house.

There was the sound of heavy steps beneath, and half sobbing, he sprang into his room, slammed and bolted the door.

Once inside, he looked about frantically in search of a weapon There was nothing. He seized a chair and wrenched at one sturdy leg. A club was better than bare hands. But before he could break it off, there was a booming crash, and the massive door split like wet pasteboard. A pale, wire thewed arm, clad in a ragged grey sleeve, and covered with oily green hairs, thrust savagely through the panel. There was an odd, grating noise. Selden realized with a surge of nausea that it was the grinding of teeth.

A face appeared in the gap, and he froze, gripped by flaming yellow eyes, pupil-less, and full of inhuman ferocity. This was the end, of course, Selden knew. No use fighting a thing like that. At the same time, deep inside of him, he was sure this was only a nightmare, bound to end soon with his awakening. But if that was so, why didn't he face up to the monster, laughing—when a person *knew* it was only a dream, that had always ended the terror before.

Then he realized something significant. The creature was not coming in, after all, even though the door was no longer an obstacle. Instead, slavering with rage, it shielded its face from the lantern. Clearly, it was unable to stand the light at closer range.

Selden felt new hope, remembering the inscription of the carving. If he could keep the thing at bay until dawn, the danger would be over. With the first light, it would have to seek shelter. That meant, almost certainly, a return to the cellar. Once here, it would be trapped until nightfall, and by that time, a dozen State troopers with tommy guns, or even bazookas, if necessary . . .

Then Selden groaned. Fool, he thought; the can of gas was still outside in the car. There couldn't possibly be enough in this

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lamp to last more than an hour or so. He leaped over to it and made an estimate. Eighty minutes, maybe, at the most. And once the light failed, he was done for.

What about help? Any way to summon it? Not likely; the place was well isolated, and besides, what would be the use of calling somebody close enough to explain. The thing at the door, hearing a voice out there in the dark, would almost certainly take off after easier prey, with no lantern. And once in the open, at night—my God, the children! It came to him that the big party at the Dacre's would break up soon. When that happened, several dozen little boys and girls would stream across those black fields towards their homes. Sure, there would be a few adults around, but much good they'd do against this horror. The thought of the insensate thing raging among a group of terrified children was more than Selden could stand. It was his fault, in any case. Why did he have to find the hidden door?

He turned for a look. The creature was still there, unwilling to give up. The awful travesty of a face would peer through the shattered wood, then, with bubbling cries, draw back from the light. Selden tensed. Would a really bright beam kill the monster? The flashbulbs!

He leaped to the bureau, wrenched open the top drawer, and there, by the camera, was the flashgun. How many of the tiny bulbs left? He'd used quite a few, taking pictures of the house for his wife. Damn; only four left. Should he set them off all at once, or individually? Better go for broke; maybe a single good flash would kill the thing, or at least disable it.

HASTILY, ignoring those highly unpleasant sounds at the door, Selden arranged the peanut bulbs so that one would fire the other three. Setting his teeth, he forced his unwilling body nearer the threshold. At his advance, the monster quivered with a kind of greedy anticipation, and one great paw poked through the sagging door. The light pained it, however, and frustrated the thing withdrew again.

Selden stood there, his heart pounding, just outside of reach, flashgun high and ready. In a moment the terrible, noseless face peered in again, and he fired the bulbs. There was a thin screech of agony, and Selden could hear the great bulk writhing on the floor just past the entrance to the room. His hopes soared; but then the demon's suffering seemed to lessen, and it was clear that although it had received a nasty shock, it was far

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from finished. In another few minutes, it stood by the door again, keeping its relentless vigil, and obviously waiting for the light to die.

Selden examined the lamp. About half an hour to go. Light couldn't kill the thing, that was plain enough; at least, not four tiny flashbulbs. What else was there? Half feverishly he thought: light . . . vibrations . . . electromagnetic field . . . electricity and—of course, electricity: it was related to light. So what; this damned relic of a house had none. Besides, a lousy 110 volts would be the midget flash all over. Unless your feet were in water, that much current couldn't kill a baby.

Then as he stood there, feeling that every possibility was gone, inspiration came. Just outside the fence, not a hundred yards away, stood one of the great towers that carried high tension current across the state. Surely this was the only remaining solution. He must somehow lure this monster into touching one of those wires. How much did they carry? At least 75,000 volts. Some, 110,000, he'd heard. Even with a low amperage, if that didn't do it, nothing could, and he, Selden, would be the first of many victims.

His mind was racing now. There was only one way, and if those children were to be spared, now was the time. He took a deep breath, seized the lamp, and moved towards the door. If the thing refused to retreat, it was all over . . .

But the demon was still vulnerable; unable to bear the clear, whitish light, it backed away with slobbering cries of rage. Slowly, his intestines knotted with fear, Selden forced the monster down the stairs, a step at a time, and out the front door. It was a critical move. From now on, no matter how much gas he had, there was no possibility of trapping the demon. Not when it had the whole county to move in. It would be like trying to checkmate with one piece. No, it was up to Selden to make the creature follow him to its doom.

Out in the cool air, he began to back towards the fence. No time to go around to the gate; the direct route was faster. He slipped the lantern through the rustic bars, vaulted over, and headed for the steel tower. Just behind, barely out of the light, nemesis followed implacably.

At the foot of the tall, steel structure, Selden hesitated. Should he leave the lamp here? It would burn for a while, keeping the monster off; then, when it went out, the thing could climb, and Selden would be ready. No. Suppose, before the light failed, the children came? He couldn't risk that. The lamp

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must go with him, to be quenched without delay at the right time.

He took the bail in his teeth, gripped a girder, and began. He'd never doubted for an instant that the thing could climb, and sure enough, it was following him up.

EVEN a college athlete in good condition would have found such a climb difficult, and Selden was no longer a boy. Nevertheless, thinking of the children in that gaily illuminated house a few hundred yards away on the hill, he found hidden reserves of strength. Slowly, panting and sweating, he inched his way up. It seemed to take hours, and the demon just below gnashed and snarled with the lust to destroy.

There! He could go no farther. Just overhead, now, was the nearest of the thick, aluminum cables, alive and humming with high voltage current. Damn! A new problem: that bright red light on the tower, just over his head. It was meant to warn off small planes. Well, it would have to go, since the monster might not come otherwise. Selden held on with one hand, lamp in teeth, pulled out his handkerchief, and wrapped it about his knuckles. Stretching full length, he gave the heavy globe a mighty swat. It fizzed and quickly went out.

The lantern was sputtering, too. In a moment it would fail. There was no room at all to maneuver. Was the plan a failure even now? No, there was one desperate, last chance. Selden took the lamp from his teeth, set his jaw, and flung the thing like a meteor into the night. The monster gave a snarl of exultation; and flexing his knees slightly, Selden leaped into space. It was a mighty jump, and brought both hands against the lowest cable some ten feet from the tower. No current tore through his body, since he was ungrounded. Everything now depended on whether the monster imitated him exactly, or took what seemed a simpler course.

Standing near the top of the tower, the hulking thing stretched out one powerful arm, and gripped a cable. Whether it meant to shake Selden loose, or go after him, hand over hand, will never be known. There was a mighty spurt of blue flame as 75,000 volts of electricity crashed into the hairy body. Selden heard a long squalling cry, followed by a single deep groan. Then something was flailing up and back between tower and cable, arcing each time. It burned and burned and burned . . .

THE END

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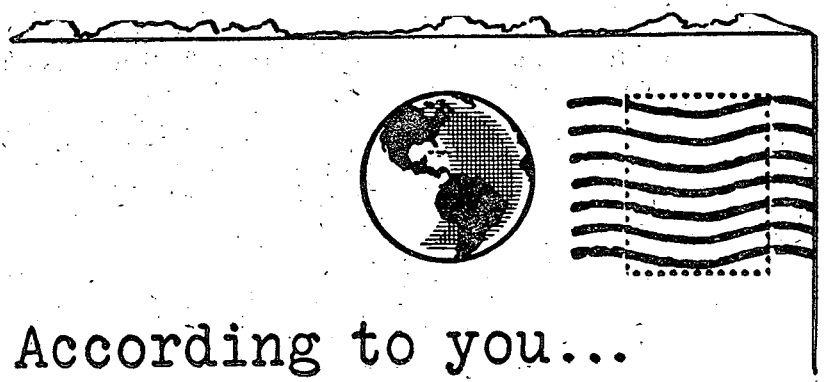

According to you...

Dear Editor:

Just got—and finished reading—the May *Fantastic*, and wish to compliment you on the issue. Both your mags are improving steadily, and this is your best yet with *Fantastic* in my opinion (the annish was unquestionably the best issue of either you've put out so far, but then it was special). Were it not for the regrettably small size of the mag, I might almost have been reading UNKNOWN again. Out of five stories three were pure fantasy and one was borderline —certainly no less fantasy than, say, *Darker Than You Think*, or *Sinister Barrier*, which appeared in UNKNOWN. The one exception was so short as to make little difference—I haven't read it, since I can't stomach Bunch, but fortunately his blobs are so short that they don't seriously mar the mag even when you include them, and I guess *somebody* must like them or you wouldn't go on printing them.

The Leiber was good—not quiteup to his best, which is very good indeed, but quite competent and enjoyable. I'm a great fan of Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser anyhow, although I think Leiber sometimes overdoes it when assigning them human frailties. To do that in most stories is admirable, but in a fantasy of that particular type I don't think so. For maximum effect, the hero must be much larger than life—viz. Conan, Tarzan, John Carter. De Camp made the same mistake in some of his stories—notably "The Tritonian Ring", and others of the same cycle. What is admirable in the development of a Harold Shea detracts from a Fafhrd.

The Sharkey was very good—the sort of thing he should stick to and make his own. With Kuttner dead and de Camp inactive, the

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field is hurting for someone to treat serious subjects in a wry manner, and very few are even making a stab at it. Sharkey looks like the favorite right now, if he keeps up stories like this one.

The Porges was a neat little twist, and a new idea as far as I know. Nothing major, but a pleasant bit.

The Howard was Howard, all the way, though I didn't much care for the "frame". It is unnecessary in this more sophisticated day, though I realize that at the time he wrote it was customary. But the authentic flavor was there. Keep up the work in choosing your reprints. I think that the shorts come through better in fantasy "classics" than in sf, personally. But I've already expressed my views on that subject to you.

The cover was superior—I've never heard of Kramer, but keep him, by all means. He and Schomburg are your best for *Fantastic*—Summers and Valigursky fit better in *Amazing*. The interior illos are competent but not inspiring. Has Cartier quit the game? He was always by far the best at illustrating fantasy, in my opinion. If you could only attract him back. . . . Also, why not have a department similar to the An Lab in ASF? That feature adds much to the mag for me, and I'd think it would be of benefit to you, too. If I lived in New York I'd even volunteer my services free to compute the scores, but being this far from the center of gravity handicaps me no little in all fan activities, and especially something like that. I'd be interested in seeing what the reaction to such a department would be, though—it would consume very little space.

David G. Hulan
132 Goss Circle, 9B
Redstone Arsenal, Ala.

● *We think readers' letters are as good a guide to who liked which story as any naive little rating device. What we really need is a machine that could reflect the readers' preferences beforehand. The only kind of thing we have along those lines now is a primitive model called an "editor."*

Dear Editor:

I have just finished reading *The Violin String* by Henry Hasse in the April *Fantastic*, and these are my reactions to the story:

In your introduction you state that Hasse has tried his hand—"and quite successfully—at modernizing a Lovecraft theme and a Lovecraft style . . ." This is, of course, entirely incorrect—almost

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laughably so. For just a slight examination of the tale will show that it lacks the one major factor which made any Lovecraft piece: the sense of mood. Lovecraft once wrote his own idea of what a weird tale should be. It went like this: "All that a wonder story can ever be is a vivid expression of a certain type of human mood." In order to be even a moderately successful Lovecraft imitator, you *must*, MUST use this statement as your sole guide to writing your story. Mr. Hasse does not possess the remarkable gift that those few like Lovecraft or Poe possessed which enabled them not so much to write a well-plotted story—indeed, several tales of both writers include little or no plot at all (and Lovecraft was certainly not original in his plots, any more than any sf, writer who writes of time travel today is truly original). The key to their greatness was in their ability to set and maintain a mood in *anything* they wrote, and do it very well.

David H. Keller, in his article *Notes on Lovecraft* in my amateur magazine, attempted to pick out what was wrong with Lovecraft's best stories—and he approached it from the inconsistencies, irrevelancies, and impossibilities in the stories. Even while doing this, however, he was careful to note that Lovecraft had a remarkable talent for writing a mood which would carry the reader over such flaws, had they not been searching for them. As he points out, there are actually no major pieces of Lovecraftiana which do not contain structural flaws! Why, then, are they great? Because they maintained a powerful, all-absorbing mood which immersed the reader into the story itself. The stories, when read, carry an acute sense of realism due to this mood despite the fact that when stripped to the bare minimums they are, according to plot values, no better than any lesser writer of the period. Henry Hasse does not possess that wondrous gift which set HPL apart. He writes more like a poor imitator of Derleth than an equal to Lovecraft—for even Derleth has been able to capture some of the mood (although distinctly his own, without attempting to copy his predecessor but to be himself), a feat Hasse can never accomplish.

For Hasse depends solely on plot, with the mood completely stripped away. When reading his piece the reader is not carried into his imagination, but is left with the pure and simple knowledge that he is reading a story, pure and simple, which is not at all meant to be believable. With a poorly sketched background ("You must begin in the world of man and *slowly* lead up to The Unnameable," said

(Continued on page 130)

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ACCORDING TO YOU

(Continued from page 128)

Lovecraft) and poor characterization, Hasse leaves me with a sense of utter disgust rather than pure enjoyment. Dr. Keller said in his article that Lovecraft's main fault was in cataloging his Unknowns and exhibiting them as if in a zoo, a contention I cannot agree with. Yet this is certainly what Hasse has done—left nothing to the imagination whatsoever, very neatly and precisely cataloging every little detail, every little movement pertaining to the Unknown Factor, leaving absolutely nothing to the reader's imagination. Nothing, that is, but the entire background which should have been completely and competently filled in to give some slight semblance of realism to his story. This he has not done. You might just as well take the poorest professional sf and fantasy writer today and tell him to write a great masterpiece of fantasy. You cannot say "This is a masterpiece" without having good grounds for saying so. Neither can you pass off the mantle of Lovecraft to an sf writer who is only fair in the first place. It simply cannot be done! A piece is not great unless it passes every test, and you cannot call a pastiche such as this one excellent unless it, too, passes every test; in this case, the test being a minute comparison between the imitator and the imitated.

Mr. Hasse flunked.

Jack L. Chalker
511 Liberty Heights Ave.,
Baltimore 7, Maryland

● *There is no question of "correctness" or "incorrectness" about what is purely a matter of opinion. We still think Hasse did a Lovecraft-smanslike job (pardon the pun). We venture to say you can find many fantasy fans who find even some of Lovecraft's stories more flawed than flawless. However, we welcome controversy.*

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"Then I caught the faintest of His thoughts and I stiffened. My mind grasped the idea in the Creator's mind."
(See The Creator)
ADKINS

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